

Bungo Stray Dogs, Vol. 2

**Kafka Asagiri
Sango Harukawa**

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B U N G O

STRAY DOGS

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2

OSAMU
DAZAI
AND THE
DARK ERA



BUNGO

STRAY DOGS

OSAMU DAZAI AND THE DARK ERA



**OSAMU
DAZAI**

The youngest executive in the Port Mafia's history and a suicide enthusiast.

**SAKUNOSUKE
ODA (ODASAKU)**

The lowest-ranking member of the Port Mafia; a sort of jack-of-all-trades.

**ANGO
SAKAGUCHI**

An informant with the Port Mafia.



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OSAMU DAZAI AND THE DARK ERA



KAFKA ASAGIRI

ILLUSTRATION BY

SANGO HARUKAWA



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Bungo Stray Dogs, Volume 2
KAFKA ASAGIRI

Translation by Matt Rutsohn
Cover art by Sango Harukawa

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Yen Newsletter

A few hours before writing this manuscript at an out-of-the-way lodging house in Ginza during my time in Tokyo, I was at a bar called Lupin with Osamu Dazai and Ango Sakaguchi—or I guess I should say Osamu Dazai was drinking beer, Ango Sakaguchi was drinking whiskey, and I was drinking coffee because I was going to be holed up all night writing this manuscript.

The conversation just so happened to shift to a certain fashionable novelist who uses his works as a tool to seduce women. Ango Sakaguchi claimed that this novelist was an idiot, while Osamu Dazai said we probably couldn't use our writing to seduce women even if we wanted to. He said women are grossed out by novels like ours, and even if we tried to seduce them, we'd fail miserably...or in his words: "We'd fuzz it up."

—Sakunosuke Oda, "The Literature of Possibility"

PROLOGUE

I headed to the pub, feeling as if someone was calling me there. It was eleven o'clock at night; I slipped through the streets like a fugitive from the ghostly glow of the gas lamps before walking through the pub door. Tobacco smoke wafted all the way up to my chest as I descended the stairs to find Dazai already seated at the counter, twiddling a cup of liquor between his fingers. He was usually here. Without taking so much as a sip of what he'd ordered, Dazai quietly stared at me.

"Hey, Odasaku," he said with a mirthful note in his voice.

I lifted a hand and greeted Dazai before taking the seat next to him. The bartender placed my usual on the counter before me without even having to ask.

"What are you doing here?" I said to Dazai.

"Just thinking. Y'know, philosophical and metaphysical things."

"Like what?"

Dazai pondered for a moment before answering, "For most things in life, it's harder to succeed than fail. Wouldn't you agree?"

"True," I answered.

"That's why I should attempt suicide rather than commit it! Committing suicide is difficult, but it should be relatively easier to fail at attempting suicide! Right?"

I gazed at my glass for a few moments. "You're right."

"I knew it! Eureka, as they say! Well, there's no time to waste. Let's test the theory. Barkeep, got any detergent on the menu?"

"No," the elderly bartender behind the counter replied while washing a glass.

"What about detergent with soda?"

"No."

"Nothing, huh?"

"Looks like you're out of luck," I added.

I scoped out the pub once more. Being in the basement, this place naturally had no windows. The interior was like a quiet, inconspicuous badger's nest packed with a counter, stools, empty bottles lined up against the wall, taciturn regulars, and a bartender wearing a crimson vest. This underground space was so crowded that people could just barely squeeze through the aisle. Everything in there

was old, as if their existence were carved into the space itself.

I took a sip of my liquor, then asked Dazai, “So you’re in a philosophical mood tonight, huh? Did you mess up at work or something?”

“Yeah, I messed up. Big-time.” Dazai pouted. “It was a sting operation, see. It all started when we got word that some merry little group wanted to steal our smuggled goods during delivery. These friendly fellows were willing to snatch the bread out of our mouths, so I was certain they’d be some sort of imposing band of fearless warriors. I lay in wait to ambush them—my heart was racing with excitement. I thought if all went well, I could die a heroic death on the battlefield. But the dozen or so armed guys who showed up were a real scrappy bunch. The only thing worth mentioning is the machine gun—equipped canvas truck with a rocket launcher attached. I was so disappointed that I set up a trap in the warehouse, but when we surrounded them and attacked, they ran away crying. Thus, I unfortunately avoided death once again. What a boring waste of time...”

I figured as much. I couldn’t imagine the man ever actually making a mistake on the job.

“What group were they with?”

“We caught one of the little balls of energy before he could escape, so he’s being tortured as we speak. Probably shouldn’t be long before he talks.”

Those guys had some guts. *I’d* certainly consider them fearless warriors, seeing that they weren’t afraid of the relentless Port Mafia’s retaliation. And despite Dazai’s disappointment, they came with machine guns and rocket launchers. They weren’t complete idiots with no grip on reality.

Too bad it was Dazai they were up against.

We had a saying in the Port Mafia: “The greatest misfortune for Dazai’s enemies is that they are *Dazai’s* enemies.” If he wanted to, he could even have a picnic in the middle of a firefight. Dazai was *practically born to be in the Mafia*.

The man was an executive of the underground organization Port Mafia—Osamu Dazai.

To an outsider, seeing the title of Mafia exec on a guy who could easily be mistaken for some kid would be a hilarious joke. But they wouldn’t be laughing if they saw Dazai’s list of achievements—a dark and bloody list. Around half of the Port Mafia’s profits those past two years were all thanks to him. A mere stooge like myself couldn’t even fathom just how much money that was, nor how many lives were lost as a result.

Of course, all glory comes at a price.

“You’ve got some new injuries, I see.” I pointed at Dazai’s freshly wrapped bandages while taking a quick sip of my drink.

“Yep.” Dazai smirked as he looked himself over.

His body was covered in scars, the price he paid for his success. In other words, the man was a mess. There was always a part of his body that was under repairs. Once again, it really made me conscious of how Dazai thrived in the center of violence and death.

“What happened to your leg?” I asked while pointing, sure that the injury was from a horrific, gruesome face-off.

“I was walking and reading a book called *How to Not Get Hurt Out of the Blue* and fell into a drainage ditch.”

A surprisingly absurd reason.

“Then what about your arm?”

“I was speeding around a mountain path and drove off the cliff.”

“What about the bandages around your head, then?”

“I was trying to kill myself by slamming my head into the corner of a block of tofu.”

“You hurt yourself on a block of tofu?”

He must have been in desperate need of some calcium.

“I invented a method for hardening tofu. You use salt to absorb the water and place a weight on it...all in your own kitchen, see. It got so hard that you could drive a nail through it. Thanks to that, I know more about making tofu than anyone in this organization.”

A Mafia executive who’s a stickler for tofu production... The five execs really were on a whole other level.

“Was the tofu good?” I asked.

“Aggravatingly so.” Dazai grimaced with apparent disappointment. “I cut it into thin slices, then had it with some soy sauce. It tasted incredible.”

“It was good, huh...?” I was impressed. No matter what he did, Dazai seemed to reach heights that normal people couldn’t. “Let me try some next time.”

“Odasaku... You should’ve spoken up right there.”

I heard a voice coming from the entrance, then turned around to find a young, scholarly-looking man descending the staircase.

“You’re too soft on Dazai. You should be calling him out and whacking the back of his head with a hammer for every two out of three things he says, or else he’s going to go off the rails. Look around. Notice the awkward silence of all the people wanting to say something. Even the barkeep is trembling a little.”

His name was Ango Sakaguchi. Dressed in a business jacket and round glasses, he looked like an academic, but he was actually one of us. Ango was the Mafia’s personal informant.

“Hey, Ango! Long time no see! Looking good!” Dazai raised a hand with a smile.

“You’re calling this ‘looking good’? I just got back from doing business in Tokyo...and it was a day trip. I’m as *worn out* as an old newspaper.”

Ango twisted his neck back and forth as he seated himself atop the bar stool next to Dazai. Then he took off the small crimson leather bag hanging over his shoulder and placed it on the counter.

“Barkeep, the usual, please.”

The bartender almost immediately set a golden liquid down on the counter before Ango. He had started making the drink the moment he heard him walking down the stairs. The foam rose out of the glass, glistening serenely in the glow of the low-hanging lights.

“Business trip, huh? Lucky dog. I wanna go hang out in Tokyo, too. Barkeep, more canned crab,” Dazai said, shaking the empty can. There were already three empty cans in front of him.

“Hang out? Not everyone in the Mafia lives to kill time like you, Dazai. I was actually working.”

“If you ask me, Ango,” Dazai continued, a fresh piece of canned crab between his fingers, “everything in this world is just a way to kill time until we’re dead. Anyway, what kind of work was it?”

Ango’s gaze briefly wandered before he replied, “Fishing.”

“Oh, nice. Catch anything?”

“Nothing. It was a waste of time. I heard there were going to be some top-grade items from Europe, but it ended up being nothing more than the usual junk you’d see at a local flea market.”

Fishing is code in the syndicate for purchasing smuggled goods. Usually, the goods we bought were weapons or illegal articles made abroad. On rare occasions, there’d be fine art and jewels as well.

“There was an antique watch that wasn’t so bad, though. It was crafted by a watchmaker during the late Middle Ages. It’s probably a fake, but someone will be willing to pay for such fine craftsmanship.”

Ango gave us a glimpse of a box wrapped in paper inside his bag. On top of it were things he brought with him during his business trip, such as a small umbrella and cigarettes.

“...What time did the deal end?” Dazai suddenly asked while observing the goods.

“Eight PM. And I came straight back after it was over.” Ango smirked wryly before adding, “At any rate, I did what I was paid for, so it looks like I’m not going to be fired today.”

“That’s pretty meek coming from you, Ango Sakaguchi—you’re *the man who knows everything about the Mafia*,” Dazai added with a smile.

Ango, the Mafia’s personal informant, exchanged secret information with other syndicates. He wasn’t affiliated with any of the

executives' factions. The boss gave him direct orders for when a deal would take place, and he formed alliances with other syndicates, sometimes acting as a mediator to convey critical and highly sensitive information involving collusion, defection, betrayal, and the like. Put simply, he was a secret messenger. Almost all the important information that decided the course of the syndicate went through Ango before reaching the boss. Naturally, if he were tortured to talk, the intel he could provide about the Mafia would be worth more than gold. A role as essential as his could not be left in the hands of an idiot. It required someone as tough as wrought-iron wire.

"Compared with the youngest executive in Port Mafia history, my achievements are no different from a schoolboy's. By the way, are the two of you here today for a meeting of some sort?"

"Were we, Odasaku?"

"No," I answered in Dazai's place. "We didn't plan this. Dazai just happened to be here when I came by."

Stuff like this happened all the time.

"Oh, really? I just had a feeling I'd run into you both if I came here tonight, so here I am." Dazai grinned, as if amused by his own words.

"Did you need us for something?" asked Ango.

"Not really. I just thought if I came here, it'd be one of those nights. That's all."

Dazai then flicked his glass with his fingernail.

I knew what he was trying to say. We often gathered at this bar as if we were trying to avoid something. Then we would shoot the breeze under the guise of "communication" until the dead of night. We frequently ran into one another here for some reason. Even though we were all part of the same syndicate, Dazai was an executive, Ango an informant, and I a bottom-of-the-pecking-order grunt with no title to speak of. Under normal circumstances, we shouldn't have even known one another's names, much less drunk together. But here, we could hang out regardless of position or age. Perhaps it was thanks to our vast differences in the Mafia's hierarchy.

"By the way...", Dazai abruptly muttered while staring off into space. "Odasaku, it's been a while since we all started drinking here together, and yet, I've still never really heard you complain about work."

"I agree. Unlike Dazai and myself, your work is somewhat unique."

"There's nothing unique about what I do." I shook my head. "I just don't have anything worth saying. I'd only bore you."

"There you go being all secretive again." Dazai tilted his head to the side, disgruntled. "Honestly, Odasaku, out of the three of us, your

job is the most interesting to talk about. So spit it out. What've you been up to at work this past week?"

After thinking for a moment, I began answering while counting the jobs on my fingers.

"I investigated a theft at a shopping arcade under the Mafia's jurisdiction. The culprits were a few local elementary school kids. Then I went to the home of an affiliate group's lackey to look for a missing pistol, which I found in his rice cooker while I was cleaning up. After that, I mediated a quarrel between the wife and the mistress of one of our shell company executives. Lastly, I disposed of a dud that was found behind the Mafia's office."

"Hey, Odasaku, I'm begging you. Please switch jobs with me." Dazai leaned forward, sparkles in his eyes.

"Not a chance."

"But you found a dud! Did you hear that, Ango? Why does Odasaku get all the fun jobs? It's not fair! First thing tomorrow, I'm going to the boss and telling him this executive's gonna quit 'cause he doesn't get to handle duds!"

The other executives might've keeled over if they'd heard that. Ango apathetically replied, "You do that," just as he always did.

In a sense, I was part of the Mafia in name only. All the jobs that came my way were the crap jobs no one else wanted to deal with. Simply put, it was because of my lack of achievements and rank, and since I didn't work directly under any particular executive, it was really easy to push the petty jobs that didn't make a profit onto me. Basically, I was the Mafia's errand boy. I didn't do this just for kicks. That one time when I was caught in the middle of a screaming match between that executive's wife and lover, I seriously considered biting my tongue off—twice. But the reason I was forced into this position was simply because I couldn't do anything else.

Because...

"Then at least let me go with you next time. I won't get in the way."

"I wouldn't recommend that." Ango glanced at Dazai out of the corner of his eye. "Forget searching for criminals or looking for lost goods. Bringing Dazai to solve a lovers' quarrel is just going to be pouring oil into the fire."

"Who wouldn't want to keep a relationship's fire burning? Sounds wonderful if you ask me."

"See? What did I tell you?"

I took a silent drink without responding to Ango's point.

"Dazai, maybe you should get a hobby before you start meddling in other people's work," continued Ango. "Something more wholesome than attempting suicide."

“Hobbies? Hmm...” Dazai pouted boyishly. “Chess and Go are too easy, though. They’re boring. What else is there?”

“What about sports?”

“I hate getting tired out.”

“How about studying, then?”

“Too much work.”

“Then how about cooki—? Wait. Forget it.”

Ango lowered his head and covered his mouth. He must have remembered when Dazai made us that “peppy hot pot.” It gave us plenty of pep, just as the name suggested, but we had no memory of what happened the next few days after we ate it. When we grilled Dazai later about what was in the hot pot, he just giggled.

“Oh yeah, I created a new hot-pot recipe. Would you guys be up to trying it next time we hang out? I call it the ‘superhuman stamina pot.’ You can run for hours without getting tired after eating it. It’s a dream of a—”

“Not in a million years,” Ango sternly declined.

“If it keeps you from getting tired, then it might be pretty useful before a hard day’s work,” I added.

“...Odasaku, that’s exactly the problem right there. You’re enabling Dazai. You don’t speak up, and that’s why he goes off the rails.”

I see. So this was what Ango meant by “enabling” him. You learn something new every day.

“Barkeep, do you have a hammer?”

“I do not.”

“Oh, too bad.”

“Guess there’s not much you can do about that,” Dazai said with a smile.

“Sigh... I just got back from work, and my head already hurts...” Ango hung his head. He must have had a rough day.

“You work way too hard, Ango,” I told him.

“Yeah, you do.”

Ango glanced sharply back and forth between Dazai and me, then said, “It would appear so. I feel like I’m working unpaid overtime right now. I should get going.”

“What? Leaving already?” Dazai asked, a hint of disappointment in his tone.

“To tell the truth...” Ango’s smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. “When I’m here drinking with you two, I almost forget that the work I’m doing is illegal. Barkeep, thanks for the drink.”

Ango removed his belongings off the counter, then stood up.

“You take that bag with you when you go out of town for business?” I asked, pointing at his small leather bag. I didn’t have any

specific reason for asking; that's just all I could think of to stop him.

"Yes. It doesn't have much in it, though. Just some cigarettes, a weapon for self-defense, a small umbrella..." Ango opened the bag wide to show me its contents. "And this camera I use for work."

"Oh, hey. Let's all take a picture together," Dazai cheerfully suggested out of the blue. "To commemorate today, y'know?"

"Commemorate what?" I asked.

"To remember we were here. Or to celebrate Ango being home. Or to celebrate you disposing of that dud. Anything will do, really."

"Whatever the executive says," Ango stated with a shrug before pulling a black camera out of his bag. It was an old roll-film camera, with the black paint chipped off here and there from age and use.

"Make sure it looks cool," said Dazai.

Ango smirked as he took a picture of Dazai and me together. Then, by Dazai's request, I took one of him and Ango by the counter. Dazai posed by placing one leg on the stool and leaning into it. "Taking it from this angle makes me look more handsome."

"Why did you want to take photos all of a sudden, Dazai?"

"I just felt like if we don't take a picture now, there'll be nothing left to prove we spent this time together, I guess." He grinned brightly.

It turned out Dazai was right. That ended up being our last opportunity to photograph that invisible *something* among the three of us—the only thing to make us aware of the void left behind once we lost it. We never got another chance to take a picture together in that bar.

Because one of us died soon after.

CHAPTER I

The Port Mafia has three rules: Follow the boss's orders no matter what, don't betray the organization, and always hit back twice as hard. The rules are ordered from most to least important, just like that. Which was why that morning, I nearly dropped the piece of bread I had in my mouth when I got a call telling me the boss wanted to see me. I was just putting on a pot of coffee.

The agent on the phone spoke in a monotone.

"Sakunosuke Oda, the boss wants to see you."

Three phrases instantly popped into my head: Served his purpose. To be disposed of. Personnel cut. My fingertips turned cold and numb. After hanging up, I quickly stuffed the rest of the bread down my throat, then cut my Canadian bacon and scrambled eggs into thirds before inhaling them. I poured some freshly brewed coffee into my mug, tossed in a sugar cube with some cream, and drank it up all while slipping on my shirt arms-first. I started to wonder if I should just skip town, but the searing-hot coffee kicked my mind into gear, and the absurd notion vanished from my thoughts. I shaved, then put on some pants and hoisted my leather harness over my shoulders. It had holsters below my armpits, which I slipped my trusty 9mm handguns into. Finally, I tossed on my coat and left the house.

After getting into the car, I recklessly hightailed it to the office. I don't really remember much about what happened along the way; I might've driven down the three-lane highway in the wrong direction two or three times. At any rate, once I made it to the office safely, I headed straight for the lobby. I briefly greeted my colleagues on guard duty before getting into the elevator to go to the top floor. Everything about the place was spotless, without even so much as a single fingerprint or speck of dust—from the lobby, which felt like something out of a luxury European hotel, to the time machine-like elevator itself.

This office was located in prime real estate in the middle of Yokohama. There were four other offices of the same scale in the neighborhood. As I gazed out of the elevator's glass walls at the city, the number of buildings higher than my line of sight gradually dwindled until it reached zero. And still the elevator kept on going.

Looking down at the cluster of buildings drenched in the morning

light, I mused over why the boss had summoned me.

When I actually thought it through, it wouldn't have made sense for him to call such a low-ranking member all the way here just to dispose of them. If he'd wanted to do that, he'd just have me meet at some waste-treatment site and get a hit man to cut me up and toss me out—low cost, low effort. The Port Mafia's boss was much more logical than his predecessor, and above all, he preferred to keep that kind of stuff eco-friendly.

So why in the world did he summon me?

The elevator door opened, breaking my train of thought. The hallway was laid with a carpet thick enough to muffle even the most hurried footsteps, and the walls were so strong that not even a rocket-propelled grenade could take them down. The concealed light fixtures illuminated the interior with a milky-white glow.

I told the black-suited guard my name, and he pointed to the office door without saying a word. Standing in front of the French door, I gave my outfit another quick once-over, then traced my chin with my finger to make sure I hadn't missed a spot shaving. After clearing my throat, I called out like a believer addressing God in a church.

"Boss, it's me, Oda. I'm coming in."

"Come on, Elise. Put on the dress, just for a little bit! Just for a quick second!"

...What I heard coming from inside the room was disturbing. I waited three seconds, pretending I didn't hear anything. Then I took a few deep breaths.

"Boss, it's me, Oda. I'm coming in."

"Awww, please don't take off your clothes and just toss them on the floor like that! That skirt was expensive, you know!"

...Yet another troubling comment. After giving it some thought, I decided to play the role of an unsuspecting subordinate who just happened to open the door at the exact wrong moment.

"Pardon my intrusion."

With those words, I opened the door and immediately saw two people running around the spacious office: a middle-aged man in a white coat and a little girl who appeared to be around ten years old. The girl was half-naked; the man was the Mafia's boss.

"No way! Never!"

"Please, Elise, I'm begging you. Just try it on, okay? I put a lot of thought into picking this out for you. Look at these crimson frills! They're like flower petals! I'm sure it'll look great on you!"

"I don't hate the pretty clothes. I just hate how desperate you are, Rintarou."

"You're acting like this is new. Heh, I've got you now!"

“Boss.”

They simultaneously glanced in my direction at the sound of my voice—smiling. They were smiling and completely motionless.

“I came just like you told me to. What was it you needed?”

The boss continued to stare at me, that same smile still plastered to his face. His eyes were pleading, begging for help. Hopefully, he wasn’t actually expecting it from me.

“Boss, you wished to see me?”

“Uh...”

After his gaze wandered around the room—from his desk to the ceiling lights, the window, an oil painting, and a silver candlestick—the boss looked at the young girl by his side and said, “Why’d I tell him to come here again?”

“Don’t ask me.”

The girl called Elise scowled at him as if he were so much vomit on the side of the road, then left through the door to the connecting room. I waited on the boss for the next word. After peering around the office, he slipped behind his desk in the center and pressed a switch that tinted the glass windows a dull gray. As the room instantly dimmed, the boss took a seat in his black leather chair, and out of nowhere, two guardsmen suddenly and noiselessly appeared behind him. The lamp on the mahogany desk illuminated the boss’s profile—eyes squinted, brows furrowed, elbows on the desk and both hands clasped in front of his face. He spoke in a low, reverberating voice.

“Now...”

“Yes, sir.”

“Oda, I called you here for one reason and one reason alone.”

The boss shot me a piercing look through the darkened room.

“Yes.”

“Oda...” After pausing for a moment, he continued. “Has anyone ever told you to speak up more?”

How did he know?

“Yes, many times.”

I looked to one of the guards behind the boss for an explanation. However, the motionless, poker-faced guard averted his gaze ever so slightly.

“At any rate, you just got here. You did not see a thing. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.” I nodded in agreement. Besides, it was technically true, anyway. “I only just arrived. Thank you for taking a break from undressing a young girl and chasing her around the room to meet with me. So what was it you needed me for?”

The boss pinched his brows together for a few moments to think before nodding as if he had made up his mind.

“Dazai once said to me, ‘Odasaku has no ulterior motives; what you see is what you get. It takes some getting used to, but once you do, it’s like a balm for the soul.’ I kind of see what he means now.”

That was the first I’d ever heard of such a thing. This was Dazai, though; he was probably just talking out of his ass. A man in his twenties isn’t going to be much of a balm for anyone’s soul.

After giving a cough to clear the air a little, the boss continued, “Now, you must be wondering why I called you here.”

He picked up the silver cigar case on his desk and stared at it for a while before taking out a cigar. However, he didn’t smoke it; he merely played with it in his hand, then whispered, “I want you to find someone for me.”

“Find someone...?”

I ruminated on what he’d just said. It was fortunate that he didn’t tell me to just die, but it was still too early to relax.

“Please allow me to confirm a few points. Seeing as you’re giving me direct orders face-to-face, I’m guessing the person you wish to find is no ordinary individual. Are you sure a lowly grunt such as myself can handle it?”

“A valid question.” The boss gave a faint smirk. “Normally, a man of your rank would either be on the front line acting as a meat shield or rushing into a military police station with a bomb. But I’ve heard about the work you do, and I would like to entrust this task to you specifically.” The boss put the cigar back in the case, then swept his long bangs back. “Our intelligence officer Ango Sakaguchi has gone missing.”

If someone were to peer inside my mind at that moment, they would’ve witnessed something akin to a massive volcanic eruption. Countless question marks would have been blasting out of the crater, blanketing the sky in its entirety. And yet, the only visible reaction I had was a twitch of a finger.

“You’re able to keep calm, I see. I was going to say you wouldn’t be right for the job if you got upset, but...you passed. Allow me to continue. Ango disappeared last night. Apparently, he never made it back home. It is still unclear if he went into hiding of his own free will, or if he was kidnapped.”

So that would mean Ango went missing after we met up at the bar the night before. At the very least, there was nothing particularly different about him then. He even said he was going home before he left. Either Dazai or I would’ve noticed if he had been lying. I’m sure of it.

“As you well know, Ango is the Mafia’s informant.”

The boss heaved a dreary sigh. From his expression, he actually appeared genuinely worried about his subordinate’s safety.

“His head is chock-full of top-secret info on the Mafia: management of our secret accounts, lists of companies and government officials who pay us, contact information of clients who trade in smuggled goods. This information would make someone a fortune if sold to another syndicate, and they could cut us down and set us on fire before we knew it. Even if that isn’t the case, Ango is a talented and important subordinate to me. If something happened to him, then I want to help him. You understand how I feel, yes?”

I couldn’t say that I did. A lowly grunt would never be able to understand the thoughts of a man who manages an entire underground organization.

“Of course.”

Still, I offered a couple of words like a garnish on a dinner plate.

The boss took the quill on his desk and began spinning it around his fingers.

“I hear you specialize in troublesome matters such as this. The Mafia is full of people who are only good at shooting, punching, and making threats. Someone like you is a highly valuable asset to the organization. I’m expecting great things from you.”

The boss’s misunderstanding became clear to me: I was not a missing-persons recovery specialist, but an apprentice, an errand boy. While it was true that those were the kinds of jobs that usually came my way, for the most part it was only because I couldn’t “shoot, punch, or threaten” people.

Seemingly in a good mood, the boss opened his desk drawer and took out some silver leaf-inlaid Echizen paper. His quill pen glided across the paper’s surface as he wrote.

Sakunosuke Oda

Nihil admirari—help the man mentioned above without hesitation in the face of any and all trials.

Ougai

“This should be of some help if you need assistance from one of our own. Take it with you.”

I accepted the slip of paper from him. It’s a delegation of authority, so to speak. Within the Mafia, this document is known as a “Silver Oracle,” and whoever possesses it is granted authority equal to that of the boss himself. Show it to anyone who ranks below the five executives and give them orders, and they cannot decline. Declining is tantamount to betraying the Mafia, which is punishable by death. Holding such a legendary document in my hands almost didn’t even feel real.

“You can even order the executives around with that.” The boss grinned. “Come to think of it, you’re close friends with the executive

Dazai, yes? A friendship that surpasses the bounds of hierarchy... He's a man of quality. Feel free to count on him if you need anything."



"That won't be necessary," I answered truthfully.

"Are you sure? He isn't the youngest executive in history for nothing. His peers may treat him like he's a heretic, but I believe Dazai's capabilities are astounding. I'm sure in four or five years, he'll have killed me and taken my place."

The boss's lips curled devilishly.

Although I didn't even so much as blink, I was seriously rattled. I searched the boss's face, but that almost childlike smirk made him impossible to read. Was this his way of joking?

"I hope to hear some good news from you."

The boss returned the quill to its stand, and I gave him one last bow before heading for the door. The whole exchange left me oddly parched.

Hidden beneath the rapid onslaught of sudden developments was a sensation, albeit faint, in the back of my head telling me something was off. But my image of whatever was causing it was strangely hazy and blurred—like an old birthmark on my back that I couldn't see.

"Oda." The boss called out to me from behind right as I placed a hand on the door to leave. "That pistol hanging under your shoulder—that's a nice model."

I looked down at my gun. Inside the holster under my jacket was an old black pistol.

"It's just an antique I keep around because I'm used to using it. But I'm honored."

"I only ask you this out of slight curiosity, but rumor has it you've never killed anyone with it."

I nodded. Lying wasn't going to do me any good. "That's right."

"And why is that?"

I needed a few seconds to catch my breath before replying.

"Are you ordering me as the leader of this organization?" I asked.

"No, I merely ask out of personal interest."

"Then I prefer not to answer."

For a brief second, the boss's eyes opened wide in astonishment. Then he crossed his arms and smiled like a teacher fed up with a poor student.

"I see. Then you may go. I anticipate good news from you."



Meanwhile, Dazai was over at the port. After walking along the seaside for some time, he found himself in the warehouse district surrounded by a planted forest. There were lines of small ships with their registration numbers scraped off, various stolen cars of

international makes, and large chromatographs for manufacturing explosives. Not only did the nearby residents stay away, but even the city police avoided going there without a good reason. The area was run by underground organizations such as the Port Mafia—a death trap, to put it another way. Three bodies had washed up on the coast that morning.

“Make sure the police don’t hear about this. Also, call the cleaner. We need to get these bodies out of here.”

Men in black suits—Port Mafia grunts—silently worked at the site where the bodies were found. These city lowlifes simply gritted their teeth and did as they were ordered. There were two reasons for this: One, these were the bodies of their colleagues—fellow mafiosi. The other reason was that one of the execs was expected to arrive on-site any minute due to the gravity of the situation.

“Look into whether any of these men had families. If they do...” The mafia member in command stopped midsentence and paused for a moment. “...I’ll explain things.”

The man in charge was a senior Port Mafia member with white hair and a cigar. He had a gentlemanly air, sporting a well-starched black overcoat and a suit. This was Ryuurou Hirotzu—one of the oldest members of the Mafia.

Hirotzu took out a gold pocket watch and checked the time.

“One of our executives will be here any minute now. Finish learning everything you can about the victims before he arrives.”

“Morning, everyone!”

Hirotzu’s orders were almost immediately followed by a voice coming from the man-made forest. Everyone turned around, looking tense. From appearances alone, the young man who arrived before them could have easily been mistaken for a child. He tottered over to the group, his hair unkempt and his head, neck, and arms covered in bandages. The young man was one of the Port Mafia’s five executives—Osamu Dazai.

Hirotzu promptly put out his cigar before tucking it away in his pocket ashtray. All the men in black suits placed a hand on their chests and respectfully bowed.

“Gimme a second, okay? I’m about to clear this really hard level—Oh, crap! He passed me! Eat this! ...Ack, he dodged it!”

Dazai walked closer, struggling with a handheld video game. He was so focused on the screen that he would have face-planted if he had stepped onto even slightly more uneven ground.

“Ugh. I can’t beat this level no matter how many times I try! This curve here is the tricky part. Every time I go around it, I—Gah! He passed me again!”

“Dazai, sir.” Hirotzu timidly spoke up on behalf of the others,

since they were unable to say anything. “Thank you for coming all this way. The armory guards were shot, and as of now—”

“It’s been a while since anyone’s been crazy enough to target a Port Mafia armory! How’d they do it?” Dazai asked, still focused on the video game.

“Our men were killed instantly after being hit with around ten to twenty 9mm rounds each. Then the intruders stole various firearms from the armory: forty submachine guns, eight shotguns, fifty-five pistols, two sniper rifles, and eighty grenades. They also took a total of eighteen kilograms of detonator-type high explosives. The electronic lock was opened with the passcode. How that code was leaked is still —”

“Let me have a look, then. Here, take care of this for me.”

“Huh?”

Hirotsu’s expression turned stern as Dazai handed him the game system. “The trick is in the timing. You use a booster item once you reach the straight path in the middle of the course. So where are the bodies?”

“Oh, uh, they’re lined up by the tetrapods— Wh-what buttons am I supposed to press?”

Dazai skipped off to the concrete blocks and ignored Hirotsu, who was holding the console upside down in a fluster. There lay three bodies, each wearing sunglasses and black suits. They were very tough men—up until yesterday. Soaking in the ocean for a few hours had caused their skin to swell, but they would have been in far worse condition if they had drowned; all three of them had bled out almost completely before being tossed into the ocean to sink to the bottom.

“Hmm.”

Dazai gazed disinterestedly at the corpses.

“Their weapons are still in their holsters. Well, that’s just sloppy. Also...most of the gunshots have exit wounds...which means they were fired at close range, from a submachine gun. You’d have to be pretty skilled to get this close without being noticed. I’m getting my hopes up. What about the warehouse’s surveillance footage?”

Dazai turned to Hirotsu, who simply gazed forlornly down at the game system in his hands and revealed a totaled car on the screen.

“I am deeply ashamed of myself...,” Hirotsu mumbled.

Dazai stared at him curiously, as if he had already completely forgotten that he’d passed the game to Hirotsu.

“Mr. Hirotsu.” Dazai’s eyes narrowed.

“I... I’m sure if you just give me one more chance, I could—,” Hirotsu pleaded as he gripped the game system once more.

“Anyone in the lower ranks who causes problems over narcotics should immediately be cut loose,” Dazai suddenly said.

“Narcotics?” Hirotzu turned pale. “No, nobody is involved in anything like that...including my subordinates. My men are top caliber—”

“The gun at your waist.”

Dazai pointed at him. Hirotzu swiftly covered the gun tucked away in his suit belt with his hand, although not on purpose; it was merely a natural reflex.

“Mr. Hirotzu, you don’t usually carry a gun with you, right? Plus, you’re the kind of person who takes very good care of their weapons. And yet, the sloppy way you’ve tucked it into your belt leads me to believe that it is neither yours nor merchandise. Judging by the condition it’s in, it belongs to one of your men. Am I right?”

Hirotzu stood in silence as Dazai continued.

“You have around twenty subordinates under your wing. Did you borrow that gun from one of them? No, you didn’t. There was no reason for you to use a gun at this time of the morning. You took it. Why? Because the grip was lightly stained with blood and some white powder. But there is neither powder nor blood on you, Mr. Hirotzu. One of your subordinates must have caused some trouble over drugs. Judging by the bags under your eyes, I’m going to say it happened last night. So you tied your subordinate up and took his gun because who knows what he’d do if you didn’t.”

“That’s—,” Hirotzu uttered in a muffled voice, but Dazai kept on speaking and cut him off.

“That subordinate is ignoring the syndicate’s policy, Mr. Hirotzu. Selling drugs makes a lot of money, but it also brings a lot of problems along with it. The Special Division for Unusual Powers, narcotics agents, the MP’s criminal-organization watchdogs... Government organizations are champing at the bit just waiting for us to make any sort of mistake that would give them a chance to strike. Simply taking your subordinate’s gun isn’t going to do anything.”

“But...”

“Mr. Hirotzu, I don’t know why, but I was given the lofty position of executive, and when you’re an executive, you get subordinates whether you want any or not. But I can’t produce results with a bunch of sloppy flunkies. That’s why I cut the bad ones loose early. You should do the same.”

“...I am deeply sorry,” Hirotzu mumbled, his voice strained.

In the Mafia, “cutting the bad ones loose” means killing them. Refusing executive orders is treated as betrayal and dealt with in the same fashion.

Hirotzu apologized but said no more after that. Dazai fixed him with a piercing gaze; the silence was so deafening that time nearly froze in place.

“...Ha-ha! Just kidding!” Dazai abruptly added in a cheery tone. Hirotsu stared back at him, confused. “The reason you have so many people following you is that you don’t turn your back on them. I’ll leave things in your hands. I won’t tell the boss.”

He patted Hirotsu on the shoulder and smiled. Hirotsu unconsciously rubbed his throat while he nodded. He must have been tense.

Dazai, the youngest executive in the Mafia’s history, was a living legend within the syndicate. Nothing got past him, be it from an enemy on the outside or a scandal from within the group. More importantly, nobody had even an inkling of Dazai’s desires or dislikes, or what he supported or was opposed to. Not even Hirotsu, who’d been in the Mafia for longer than most, could figure him out. No one would have been surprised if Dazai had “disposed” of Hirotsu just then.

“All right, let’s get back on topic. Is there any footage of the attackers?” Dazai asked with a snap of his fingers.

At Hirotsu’s signal, a man in a black suit brought over a total of five pictures from the security camera. Dazai took them from him and began to study them. The stills showed several men sneaking into the warehouse and stealing the Port Mafia’s firearms. The thieves were wearing worn-out sacks over their heads and dingy cloaks instead of overcoats. On the surface, they didn’t look any different than your average back-alley thug. However...

“Those are soldiers.” Dazai’s lips slightly curled the moment he laid eyes on the photos. “Seasoned ones, at that.”

He looked over the dim figures of the raggedy men several times, tilting the photos this way and that.

“They look like your run-of-the-mill ruffians at first glance, but they’re moving in a diamond formation to cover their blind spots. Mr. Hirotsu, you know what kind of gun this is?” Dazai pointed at the pistol on the waist of one of the attackers.

“It is an old model, very old. It appears to be even older than me. From the gray body and narrow muzzle, I would say it’s an old-fashioned European pistol known as a *grau geist*.”

“I saw this gun yesterday.” Dazai’s eyes narrowed. “That means the men who robbed the armory attacked us immediately beforehand...which means that was just a diversion. Heh. Now things are getting interesting. These guys are even more fun than I imagined.”

With the pictures still in hand, Dazai spun around, turning his back to the others before starting to walk off. He placed a thumb on his lip, muttering to himself as he paced back and forth.

“So they purposely leaked intel that they were going to attack us

in the middle of our next business transaction. That way, we'd focus our manpower in one location, leaving only a few guards at the armory. Then they stole the weapons—a lot of them. But why? To resell? No, it wouldn't need to be weapons if that were the case. I see. This is..." Dazai rambled, lost deep in thought. All the others could do was wait for him in silence.

"....."

Hirotsu's subordinates stood stock-still as they waited for the much-younger executive to gather his thoughts.

"Y'know," Dazai commented after a good few moments of silence, "I'm thirsty."

"I will have someone buy you a drink." Hirotsu gave a flick of his finger, signaling the subordinate by his side to go. The black-suited mafioso then rushed off in a fluster.

"Get me a coffee with lots of milk. Make sure to cool it off!" Dazai cheerfully yelled out as the man dashed away. "Oh, but no ice, okay? If you can get me a decaf, that'd be even better. And double the sugar, please!"

Watching the Mafia grunt depart in a cold sweat, Dazai dropped his voice to a murmur. "Mr. Hirotsu, the enemy didn't attack just any armory. They went after one of the three major armories containing the Port Mafia's emergency weapons supply. It's heavily guarded, and an alarm sounds if anyone enters the area without permission. But these guys easily got past all that, and they sneaked in using the actual passcode—something only subexecutives and higher would know. So how did the enemy get their hands on such top-secret information?"

Hirotsu's face tensed. There were only three possibilities: A Port Mafia member was tortured into talking, someone had a skill that enabled them to extract information, or there was a traitor within the organization. All three options spelled a worst-case scenario.

"This entire area is going to turn into a war zone." Dazai gazed at the city skyscrapers and gave a small smile. "That over there is gonna end up a pillar of flames. I can already see the sky burning crimson."

"Do you know anything about the enemy organization?" Hirotsu asked, suppressing his emotions.

"One of my men tortured the prisoner we captured yesterday, but he couldn't get him to talk. The guy just waited for the right moment and killed himself with the poison he was hiding in between his molars. The only thing we got out of him was the enemy organization's name."

As if to portend the next word that would leave his mouth, Dazai shot Hirotsu a grim, piercing stare. His eyes portended an incoming storm of bloodshed and violence that would haunt the average

person's dreams for days on end.

“...*Mimic*.”



After receiving orders from the boss, I started tracing Ango's steps. But there wasn't even a single clue before me. Searching for a Mafia informant is on a completely different level from locating a missing pet cat (which I've actually done before, so I say this with confidence). If a cat runs away, then you can stake out a local feeding ground, but there was no way for me to even guess where Ango's "feeding ground" might be.

With nowhere to turn, I came up with a few hypotheses. There were two possibilities for Ango's disappearance: Either he went into hiding of his own volition, or he was abducted. If it was the former, then I was out of luck. Ango wasn't some rebellious teenager running away from his parents. If he really wanted to, he could get himself a few million in untraceable banknotes and travel the world, bouncing from one campsite to another like a nomadic tribesman. Hence why I'd tossed out this hypothesis. The other possibility was that Ango could've been taken somewhere against his will. As the boss predicted, the *most likely* scenario was that an enemy syndicate was trying to get information out of Ango. If that was the case, then I'd want to believe he secretly left behind some sort of trail, like the bread crumbs in that one Brothers Grimm fairy tale.

I decided to start off by visiting Ango's residence. Now that I thought about it, I knew next to nothing about his personal life. Our relationship was always like that, though. Ango and Dazai never talked about themselves. The three of us were like a band of thieves who just happened to be hiding under the eaves of the same abandoned temple to avoid the rain. We'd always just get lost in conversation, never knowing exactly who the other was.

But Ango often had to go out of town for business, and I remembered hearing him casually mention drifting from hotel to hotel during one of our chats. He must've stayed somewhere that had ties to the Mafia, given how many people were after his life. There were a few hotels like that within the prefecture, where privacy was of utmost importance. They each had around two dozen armed guards permanently stationed; only a select few could stay at these locations.

I began to call up some of these hotels. Once the manager realized who I worked for, his strained voice instantly softened, and he began to answer my questions courteously. If we were ever to meet face-to-face, I wouldn't be surprised if he snuggled right into my lap.

I finally found out where Ango lived once I called the third hotel.

It was an eighteen-story building with sand-colored walls, located just a little off the main drag. The surrounding neighborhood was lined with similar buildings and a park, and the entire area was steeped in a heavy stillness—or a silence, you could call it—despite the daytime hour. The silence was all too familiar for Mafia territory. It looked like just the kind of place Angelo would've enjoyed.

After receiving the room key from the manager, I headed to Angelo's suite. According to the manager, he'd started living there around half a year ago and paid in advance. However, due to the nature of his work, he rarely returned to his room. Apparently, he would show up once every few days, then disappear once again by morning. The manager claimed that Angelo never invited anyone else inside.

His room was a tidy one-bedroom suite. It'd been thoroughly cleaned—not even a speck of dust. There was hardly any furniture in the parlor, save for a small bookshelf that held a few old novels and various regional documents. In the ceiling was an air vent so cleverly hidden that it was virtually undetectable, its ventilation fan spinning almost noiselessly. A single black wooden stool sat quietly in the corner.

In the bedroom stood a short desk and a bed covered in crisp sheets. A reading light hung over the pillow upon which lay an open biography of a genius mathematician from around a century ago who had left an elegant mathematical expression.

The place practically screamed Angelo—an immaculate, smart, sterile space that didn't give a single glimpse into his life. I stood in the middle of the room and silently looked around. There was something bothering me, albeit minuscule—something I wouldn't usually give so much as a second thought.

"Angelo Sakaguchi, Mafia intelligence officer," I said aloud. "You're a mysterious, intellectual man. Nobody knows who you really are."

Of course, no one was there to respond. I headed to the double-door window with its four sheets of expertly inlaid glass. Outside was a view of Yokohama. Directly below was a park that led to a line of high-rise buildings. The stars must cast a pretty reflection off the lake at night.

I turned my back to the window and made one more sweep of the room. Immediately, I realized what had been bothering me: I was a Mafia member unable to kill. That was why I mostly got stuck with the petty, troublesome jobs. But as I held my tongue while pressing on through these tasks, I started to develop a certain sense of intuition. It was like a hair-thin thread of discomfort that could snap at any moment. However, following the thread sometimes led me to unexpected truths.

The black wooden stool in the corner of the room—it looked out of place. It didn't seem as though it belonged in this hotel, and there wasn't even a desk around to make use of it.

I approached the stool to examine it. It was your average mass-produced article. I flipped it over in hopes that there might be an important clue underneath, but there was nothing really out of the ordinary.

I returned once more to where I had been standing, then crouched down and stared fixedly at the stool. That was when I saw it—the seat was scuffed ever so slightly, even though the stool itself didn't appear to be particularly old or worn out. Upon further inspection, I noticed that not only was it a little scuffed, but it also had what appeared to be a white footprint left by a leather shoe. I scanned the room once more.

—*The ceiling air vent.*

I took the stool and pushed it under the vent. Standing atop the stool, I could just barely touch the ceiling. There was some white plastic netting covering the air vent, making it difficult to see inside. It took some maneuvering, but I managed to remove the net. Inside the air duct, the ventilation fan was still spinning quietly. I felt around the fan with my fingers for a while until they just barely caught on to something, which I then pulled toward me. It scraped noisily across the metal duct and turned out to be a small safe. After getting off the stool, I held the safe in my hands and brushed the dust off. It was white and small enough that I could easily hold it in both hands. The safe was locked, but if I could find the key or something to pick it with, I could get it open. I took the box in both hands and violently shook it in front of my chest. Something metal, but not particularly heavy, rattled inside.

That was when a vision played out in my head.

The white safe in my hands was dyed crimson in the blink of an eye, along with the wall and floor. Something gushed out, clinging to the surfaces before me.

It was blood. My blood.

Right as I looked down at my chest, another spurt of blood gushed out of it. Something entered my back and pierced through my chest. I turned around just as the window shattered and the shards fell to the floor. Something—a sniper rifle's scope, perhaps—glittered in the sunlight from a far-off building.

I reached for the gun at my side, but my arm was hit back by a high-speed bullet, spinning me around and producing a spray of blood. Feeling the warm liquid crawl up my throat, I twisted and fell

to the ground. Everything before me faded to black.

The vision ended there.

I found myself standing with the safe, still wearing the exact same clothes I was a second ago.

The safe was white.

The window wasn't broken.

I threw myself to the carpeted floor with the safe still in my hands, and almost instantly, I heard glass shatter. One, then two dark holes appeared in the wall in front of me. Crawling on the floor, I moved away from the window until I couldn't see the high-rise building outside. Then I took the gun out of my side holster and got into position with my back against the wall. There was a mirror on the table, so I reached out with my fingers and managed to grab it. My hands were so sweaty that I almost dropped it, but I somehow got a grip around the mirror to angle it so I could see outside.

When I looked at the room in the building I'd seen in my vision, I noticed a shadowy figure moving in the reflection. I couldn't tell what they were wearing, though; the figure promptly gathered their belongings before completely disappearing. The moment I put my gun down was the moment I noticed I hadn't been breathing.

A sniper.

What in the world was in this room? What happened to Ango? I was sniped and killed. I couldn't see the muzzle flash, and I didn't even hear the bullet being fired. Plus, once the perpetrator saw that they had missed the target, they immediately escaped. This was clearly the work of a professional.

I'd died only a few moments ago—sniped in the chest and shot dead.

Or at least I would have been, if I hadn't had my skill.

× × ×

I practically slid down the staircase banister to get out of there. The sniper couldn't have gotten far, and I needed to find out who they were. Shoving past innocent customers in the hotel, I made my way outside. I ran toward the building the sniper was in while pulling my cell phone out of my pocket.

A seasoned sniper can pierce their target's heart from even a mile away, but from the looks of it, the sniping point wasn't all that far off. I knew the building they were in. In fact, I knew everything about this

city, even the uncharted back alleys, so I was naturally able to narrow down the sniper's path of escape to a few possibilities.

As I sprinted, I punched in Dazai's phone number.

"Dazai?"

"Wow, it's not often I get a call from you, Odasaku. I've got a feeling this is big! Hmm. Allow me to use my genius brain to guess the situation! You suddenly thought of a hilarious joke, and it was so funny that you had to call me to—"

"Someone tried to snipe me."

Dazai immediately stopped midsentence as if the air had been sucked out of his lungs.

"I was in Ango's room. I'm going after the sniper right now. He fired from a high-rise building across from the secondhand book row. From there, he could've fled through Kokuyou-ji Temple or the service entrance to the wharf, or taken one of the Mifune shopping district's back streets."

"You want me to help block his path of escape, right?"

I hesitated for a moment. The reason I called Dazai was because he was the only one I could turn to with confidence on such short notice. However, he was one of the five executives, making him only second to the boss in terms of the Mafia hierarchy. Under normal circumstances, I would've had to send someone to ask permission to even meet with Dazai, then wait at least a month before getting an answer. Calling someone like him and giving orders is like asking the president to walk your dog.

"Dazai, I have a Silver Oracle with me. If you don't mind—"

"Quit it. You don't need that to ask me for help. You're in a fix, right?" Dazai said brightly. *"I'll have my men blockade the roads immediately. I'm gonna head over, too. Just don't follow the guy too far, Odasaku."*

I thanked him and hung up, then focused everything I had on getting my legs to move as quickly as possible.

Who was the shooter? Snipers are exceedingly cautious and patient. Strategy is their religion. Once they decide on the optimal position for taking out the target, they wait for days without moving a muscle until the target appears within range of their scope. A sniper will satisfy their hunger with ready-made meals, and when they run out of food, they just don't eat.

The fact that there was a sniper in the building meant he knew someone was coming.

The most obvious, logical reason would be that Ango himself was the target. The sniper was probably planning on shooting Ango once he cluelessly returned home. However, that then begged the question: Why did the sniper change his plan and try to shoot me? I'd only

decided to go to Angelo's room a few hours prior, and that was just a desperate attempt to find some clues. Moreover, the sniper only pulled the trigger after I found the white safe. If he'd wanted to just kill me, he would've shot me the moment I walked into the room. Maybe the sniper didn't have a firm target; maybe he would've shot anyone who walked in there. Or maybe he would've shot anyone who found the white safe.

Only one thing was clear: Angelo was apparently stuck in the middle of something big. I thought about his bespectacled visage, his cool, aloof demeanor, as I ran.

No matter how deeply I inhaled, I couldn't seem to get enough oxygen into my body. Right as my field of vision started turning spotty, I arrived at one of the routes I predicted the sniper would use to escape. It was a dark, narrow back alley littered with scraps of food left by the city crows.

I'd cut through two residential yards and leaped over three private garages to get there. It wouldn't have been out of the question to catch sight of the enemy right then and there if they weren't familiar with the area. The moment the thought crossed my mind, a man with a knife tried to grab me from a gap between the buildings. A blade practically the size of a meat cleaver sliced through the air, and I swerved my head to dodge the strike. The tip of the blade grazed the corner of my ear, leaving a cold, sharp pain. I found myself in a deadlock as he rammed into me, and I thrust my foot into his torso as hard as I could. I ended up getting thrown onto the trash-covered ground, but I was at least able to get him off.

I looked at the assailant.

He was a man of unknown ethnicity dressed in tattered gray clothes. At first glance, his filthy appearance made him look like a vagrant, but my finger happened to leave a mark in the dirt on his face. It was as if he'd put it there on purpose. The assailant swayed back and forth as he flipped the knife over from his right hand to his left. Next, he raised both elbows so that his right hand was guarding his face. It was a stance that allowed a person to quickly counter any close-range blows with minimal movement while protecting one's vitals. The bloodlust radiating from this guy was like that of a seasoned fighting dog.

I could assume several things from watching him: one, that he knew I was with the Mafia, and he was not going to cower or create an opening to be attacked; two, that he was probably the sniper I saw in the mirror's reflection; and three, that he probably planned on killing me there without even giving me the chance to wonder.

The man came at me with his left hand aloft, gripping the knife. If he were to hit me, he would split my face right open, but if I were to

try to run away or fight him, that knife would tear me to shreds. I leaned my weight against the wall behind me and used the rebound to leap in the opposite direction and create some distance between us. Then, spinning around, I drew the gun from my holster and almost immediately pulled the trigger. The bullet landed just inches before his toes—right where he was about to step. The man stopped. Only a fraction of a second had gone by from the moment I drew my gun to the moment I fired. If he knew anything about how to fight, then he'd understand that I didn't shoot randomly, but rather precisely where I wanted to.

Raising my gun, I pointed the muzzle right between his eyes, letting him know I could pull the trigger whenever I wanted. He should've had more than enough time to figure that much out, and yet, he took another step forward. His knife sliced through the air, and I leaped backward, dodging the slash. Then I fired another warning shot, and the sound of the blast echoed throughout the narrow alleyway. But it seemed to have affected him no differently than a cool breeze; the man had locked away all his fear into a tiny box in the corner of his mind and thrown away the key.

He reached out, but it wasn't me he was aiming for. I swiftly pulled the white safe under my left arm away, leaving him only air to grab, but he promptly regained his footing before pulling back with his knife.

The man was after the safe.

He'd pretended to flee in order to lure me here, in which case I might have been better off taking the safe and running away as quickly as my legs could take me. I couldn't even imagine who this guy was or the kind of value this safe had. To make matters worse, he was an expert with the knife. Gunshots didn't even faze him. On top of that, I—

The enemy thrust forward with the knife. I shot at the wall in hope that he'd flinch, but he knew where I was aiming. He didn't back off—he got even closer. I sensed there was someone else behind me, so I threw myself forward and dropped to the ground. Gunfire lit up the alleyway. The metallic clatter of the shots echoed as bullets—ones I didn't fire—glided past my ear.

My body froze. Although I couldn't look back, I immediately knew what was going on—there was another enemy behind me.

Snipers typically have people called spotters to back them up. Spotters and snipers always work in pairs, and a spotter will help the sniper readjust his aim or time the shot. Sometimes they'll also scout the area and dispose of any nearby enemies. I should've seen this coming the moment the sniper went on the counterattack. There were two enemies.

The second enemy fired his gun; he didn't use a sniper rifle, but an old-fashioned pistol. I created an off-the-cuff smoke screen by hurling the nearby garbage bags into the line of fire, then wildly shot at the wall in an attempt to use the ricochet in place of a barrage. The man with the knife closed in, giving me no time to check if my stratagem had worked. Our weapons collided, creating sparks. The base of the metal trigger guard screeched as the knife sawed into it.

I swept my opponent's ankle, knocking him off-balance, but he managed to put his hand out to catch his fall. Almost reflexively, I tossed aside the safe and drew my other gun. I walked with my two pistols aimed in both directions and almost unconsciously placed the muzzles right before the enemies' eyes with one quick motion. I wouldn't miss this close up. If I pulled the trigger, they'd instantly perish before even getting the chance to think of something meaningful. They wouldn't even have a second to feel pain. Their brains and consciousnesses would smear the alley walls, and their lives would then disappear into thin air like a magic trick.

I didn't shoot. I simply rolled out of the way to create a bit of distance, keeping both opponents in my sight with both weapons drawn.

"Odasaku, get down!"

That was when I heard Dazai's voice.

I already knew it was coming, which was why I threw myself to the ground face-first. Barely a moment later, an explosion followed by a flash of light illuminated the narrow alleyway. *My skill was to thank for alerting me to what was going to happen*; I lay on the ground, plugging my ears and shutting my eyes until the light faded. The enemies, on the other hand, were caught off guard by the flash grenade and subsequently blinded, preventing them from dodging the next attack.

A thunderous roar seemingly from the heavens itself burst through the back alley. First came a flash of light, followed by an explosive bang—then a metal-splitting screech and the sound of the ground and walls being smashed to pieces. A shower of 9mm ammo zoomed over my head. Four men in black suits rushed down the alleyway right past me, each with a submachine gun at their waist. It was the Port Mafia.

With nothing to hide behind in the narrow alley, not even the most seasoned warriors could escape the submachine guns' hellish onslaught. I heard the two men in tattered cloaks briefly scream as the gunfire buffeted them like a violent gust of wind. When I turned around, I saw blood spewing out of their bodies, enveloping them like a deep crimson mist. Then I heard a splat as they were thrown against the walls.

"You're a real piece of work, Odasaku. You could have easily

killed them in an instant, if you wanted to.”

Dazai lightly trotted over, looking as if he were about to whistle or something. The roar of submachine guns filling an alleyway was no different from the hubbub of a shopping mall on a holiday for him.

I accepted his extended hand and stood up before surveying the alley.

“You killed them?” I asked, looking down at the two fallen assassins.

“Yep. Capturing them and trying to get them to talk would’ve just been a waste of time. I mean, these guys love the taste of their interdental poison.”

I didn’t reply. It felt as if there were a lump about the size of a boulder in my stomach. Dazai faintly smiled, then said, “I know. That’s not what you were asking, right? But, Odasaku, these men were professional assassins. It doesn’t matter how good you are. *Killing them was the only option.*”

“I know.”

I nodded. Dazai was always right, and I was always doing the wrong thing.

“I can see you’re not happy... I’m sorry for compromising your principles.”

His smile weakened as he spoke. Dazai usually never apologized to anyone, which was why what he said really rang true.

“Thanks. I mean it. I would’ve died if you hadn’t come to save me.”

“Sakunosuke Oda, *a peculiar mafioso who believes killing is never the answer.*” Dazai shook his head in exasperation. “The Mafia treats you like an errand boy thanks to that perplexing belief of yours, Odasaku, your considerable capabilities notwithstanding—”



I shook my head in silence.

"I've heard that complaint so many times that I'm starting to despise myself. More importantly, about the attackers....," I continued while indicating the fallen assailants with my gaze.

"You said they shot at you while you were in Ango's room?"

Dazai listened attentively as I briefly explained what had happened at the hotel.

"I see. That sniper rifle was probably stolen from our armory," he claimed once I'd finished. "Look at his waist. He's carrying an old-fashioned pistol, right?"

When I looked down at the attackers, I noticed they both had early-model pistols hidden under their ragged clothes—gray handguns with narrow muzzles.

"These are rather old European pistols. Given their low accuracy and firing rate, they're not ideal for narrow alleys like this."

He took the gun off one of the bodies and stared at it with great interest.

"This pistol is probably more like an emblem to these men—something that indicates who they are."

Dazai seemed to be much more knowledgeable about the attackers than I was.

"Just who are they?" I asked.

"Mimic."

"'Mimic'...?"

I'd never heard of an organization by that name before.

"I don't know much about them yet, but they're apparently a European criminal organization. All I can say right now is that they came to Japan for some reason and that they're in conflict with the Port Mafia."

Rivalries between the Port Mafia and other criminal organizations weren't uncommon. Even in and around Yokohama, there were groups that competed with the Mafia over turf. Outside the reaches of the government's watchful eyes, the Yokohama Settlement was inhabited by countless outlaws who fought over territory. Dirty money came to this tax haven from all over the world to be cleaned, helping corporate crime and mercenary businesses thrive. It wouldn't be strange for a criminal organization from abroad to come over to make easy profits. But how many crime syndicates in the world had a professional sniper with a spotter?

Dazai seemed to have figured out what I was thinking from the quizzical look on my face.

"In any case, I'm in the middle of investigating the specifics," he stated with a shrug. "But maybe we'll find something out from the fact

that they had a sniper aimed at Ango's room."

"They wanted to get this safe back," I said while holding up the item in question. "I found it in Ango's room, but I can't open it without the key. We might be able to learn something if we could just open—"

"That's it?" Dazai gave a disappointed smile. "Piece of cake. Here, let me see it."

I handed him the safe, which he immediately shook, listening to the sound it made. Then he shuffled through the trash on the ground until he found a safety pin. After slightly bending the tip with his finger, he stuck it in the keyhole and wiggled it around. Not even a second went by before I heard the gear inside the safe click.

"Okay, it's open."

This man had a gift.

"Now, let's see what's inside."

Dazai opened the lid and took a peek. I could also see it from where I was standing.

Dazai started to say something, but I cut him off again.

"I really appreciate your help, but I should look into things a bit more. I'll contact you if I find out anything."

Dazai stared at me in silence, his gaze tinged with discontent. I looked away. A grim feeling came over me, as if I were submerged up to my head in a jet-black, heavy liquid that would drown me if I got too involved in this case.

"Then let me tell you something I noticed," Dazai said, stone-faced. "Yesterday, when we were drinking at the bar, Ango said he was on his way back from a business trip, right?"

"Yeah."

I believe he said he was coming back from business in Tokyo where he bought a smuggled antique watch.

"That was probably a lie."

—*What?*

"You saw his bag, right? Starting from the top, he had cigarettes, a mini umbrella, and that antique watch he'd brought back. The umbrella was wet because he'd used it, which was why it was wrapped in cloth. And his business trip had been to Tokyo, where it had been raining."

"So what's the problem?" I asked. "It rained, so the umbrella was wet. Seems logical to me."

"If Ango were telling the truth, then he wouldn't have used that umbrella." Dazai squinted as he spoke.

I couldn't sense any sort of emotion from his expression.

"Ango supposedly drove to the site of the deal, so when did he use that umbrella? It wasn't before the negotiation, since the umbrella was on top of the wrapped-up watch. And it wasn't after the fact, either."

"Why do you say that?"

"Given how wet his umbrella was, he didn't use it for just two or three minutes. It must've been in the rain for a good half an hour, and yet, his shoes and the hems of his pants were dry. The negotiation was at eight o'clock, and we met him at eleven. If he'd used his umbrella after finishing the deal, his clothes wouldn't have dried in just those three hours."

"Maybe he brought something to change into."

"He didn't have any spare clothes or shoes in his bag, and it didn't even have enough space to fit anything like that."

Maybe he just went home, changed, and left his wet clothes there—but right as I was about to say as much, I held myself back. If Ango had done that, he would have left the expensive watch at home before coming to the bar.

"He didn't use the umbrella before the transaction or afterward. And he didn't use it *during the negotiation*, either. The watch was

wrapped in paper, and it wasn't even the least bit wet. Plus, moisture is basically poison to antique watches. They had to have done business indoors."

I ruminated over what Dazai said. He was right. What Ango told us didn't explain why the umbrella was that wet.

"So what's the truth, then?"

"My guess is that he didn't purchase the watch in Tokyo; *it was his all along*. The reason why it was stuffed deep inside his bag was because he put it in there before leaving for business. But instead of going to the negotiation site, he met with someone in the rain and talked for thirty minutes before killing some time and coming back."

"Why do you think he met with someone?"

"Spies like Ango frequently choose rainy streets for their secret meetings. If you talk with your umbrella open, then no one can see your face, so you don't have to worry about surveillance cameras or people noticing you. Even if someone was eavesdropping or wiretapping him, the sound of the rain would drown out any voices. It's much better suited for confidential talks compared with inside a car or a room."

I already knew what Dazai was trying to say and what his intentions were, and yet, I had no choice but to scrutinize his every word to find some sort of silver lining.

"Maybe Ango really was lying, but he's an informant who deals with top-secret information on the Mafia. It's only natural he'd have a secret meeting or two. You can't blame him for that."

"Then he could've just told us he couldn't talk about it. If he did that, neither of us would have even brought up his work, don't you think?"

"..."

He was right.

"But Ango lied about the deal. *He even went out of his way to show us the antique watch so he could have an alibi*. Why would he go that far to hide it from us that he'd met with someone in secret?"

—*Maybe because he predicted that things would turn out like this?*

That was what Dazai's cold, distant gaze was saying.

—*What time did the deal end?*

I suddenly remembered Dazai's seemingly random question when he saw the paper wrapping. Now that I thought about it, he was able to deduce all of this with one mere glance. He'd even asked Ango that question just to make sure.

—*Ango. Mimic. Surprise attack.*

Something mysterious was slowly coming to light.

"Be careful, Odasaku. Your cup is close to overflowing," Dazai said. "If just one more thing gets thrown in there, all the water will

come spilling out the top, and you won't be able to handle the situation alone. Anyway, we'll take care of things here. You deal with Ango."

"Thanks."

After exchanging glances, I began to walk down the alley toward the back streets. That's when I noticed...

...one of the attackers was getting back up.

"Dazai!"

The attacker drew his gun practically the moment I cried out. "Don't move," he threatened in a muffled voice.

The enemy was too close to Dazai for either me or one of Dazai's subordinates to shoot. Furthermore, he had his weapon pointing at Dazai. His right hand gripped the gun while his left arm hung by his side as if he couldn't move it. With apparently no strength left to stand on his own, the enemy leaned half of his weight against the wall.

Even then, Dazai was still within his range of fire. We couldn't afford to make any mistakes.

"Oh my." Dazai stared at the pistol as if it were something unique and interesting. "You can still stand after so many bullets? Your mental fortitude is extraordinary."

One of the attackers was completely unconscious, while the other was using his last bit of strength to stand so he could take Dazai with him to the grave.

"Dazai, keep still. I've got this."

I stretched my fingers out to grab my gun. If the enemy got even a second to act, he was going to shoot. Since he was already aiming his old-fashioned pistol right at Dazai, even if I shot him right through the heart, the impact might cause him to pull the trigger. Timing was everything. I'm not a betting guy, but I didn't have any other choice.

"Your organization's called Mimic, right?" Dazai asked the man, but he didn't reply. He didn't even blink. "I'm not expecting an answer. To tell the truth, I admire you guys. No other organization has tried to take the Mafia head-on like this before. And nobody has ever successfully managed to point their gun at me like this with the intent to kill, either."

Dazai faced the attacker, then began to walk toward him as if he were taking a stroll through his garden.

"Dazai, stop," I begged in a hushed tone.

"I hope you can see the excitement in my eyes, too." Dazai continued to address the enemy who was holding him at gunpoint. "If you just squeeze your finger ever so slightly, you can give me precisely what I crave most. The only thing I'm afraid of is that you'll miss."

His lips curled as he approached the man. The muzzle was now

fewer than ten feet away.

“You need to aim for the heart or the head. I recommend the head. You only get one chance, though. My colleagues here won’t be kind enough to give you another.” Dazai tapped the middle of his forehead right over his eyebrows a few times. “But I know you can do it. You’re a sniper, aren’t you? I can still see the imprint from the sniper rifle on your cheek. You’re not the spotter.”

There was a slanted line traced across the attacker’s left cheek, the kind you get from peering through a scope for hours on end. Spotters just used binoculars; they wouldn’t have a mark like that.

The enemy’s fingers trembled as he pointed the gun. Just like Dazai said, he had only one shot. He couldn’t fire unless he was confident he could hit him. Dazai continued to approach the man, welcoming him to pull the trigger.

“Now shoot. Right here. You can’t miss from this close up.” Dazai grinned from ear to ear. “You’ll be killed whether or not you shoot, so just bury the enemy executive before you go.”

“Dazai!” I screamed. I felt as though we were thousands of miles apart.

“Please take me with you. *Awaken me from this oxidizing world of a dream.* Come, now. Shoot.”

Still pointing at his forehead, Dazai closed in on the enemy with a smile that could’ve even been described as peaceful.

The attacker bit his lip and tightened his finger around the trigger.
—*He’s at his breaking point!*

The sniper and I fired almost simultaneously.

Two flashes of light flooded the alley.

Shot in the arm, the man spun around.

Dazai violently bent backward after being shot point-blank.

A split second like a blue flash of lightning.

A never-ending instant.

Then time began to move again.

Immediately, Dazai’s men showered the enemy with bullets as he spun from the impact of my shot. Like a rag being pummeled by a waterfall, the man was thrown backward, scattering flesh and blood until he perished.

Leaning away, Dazai took two, three steps back before stopping.

“.....How unfortunate,” he lamented, still bent over. “Looks like I didn’t manage to die this time, either.”

Dazai lifted his head up. The skin on the side of his head, slightly

above his right ear, was slit open and bleeding.

The bullet had just missed.

I looked at Dazai. There was something there invisible to the human eye. You could've called it demons of the mind—something that could never be seen—just something compelled to destroy all.

“Sorry to shock you like that.” Noticing my gaze, Dazai scratched the side of his head and grinned. “Pretty realistic acting, right? I knew from the start that he would miss. The imprint from the sniper rifle was on his left cheek, meaning that was the side he used to shoot. In other words, he's left-handed, but he was holding the pistol in his right hand. So he was going to shoot with his nondominant hand, he could barely even stand on those wobbly legs, and to make matters worse, he was using that old-fashioned gun. The only way he would have hit me was if he pressed the muzzle against my body.”

I didn't say anything. I just stared at Dazai as he explained with a smile.

“All I had to do was talk to him to buy some time until his arm got tired. If I slowly walked toward him, he wouldn't be able to shoot straight away. The rest was in your hands, Odasaku. I knew you would do something. Pretty logical, right?”

“Yeah.”

That was all I said. I didn't have anything else to add. Had our ranks or relations been any different, I probably would've punched him right then. However, I am me, and there was nothing I could do to him.

After returning my gun to its holster, I turned my back to Dazai and began walking away. With every step I took, I felt as if the ground were going to collapse, creating a bottomless hole that I would fall through for an eternity.

Dazai's expression as he placed a finger on his forehead and approached the enemy—that of a child about to burst into tears—remained burned into my eyes.

CHAPTER II

The rain came and went after that. Dazai had been running around trying to get information on Mimic, while I wandered around the city in search of clues. I felt as though something important was slipping through my fingers with each passing moment, but I couldn't see what that something was. The more important it was, the less visible it became to me—especially when I lost it.

I'd spent even more time wondering. Why did Ango go missing? There was no longer any doubt that he was somehow connected to Mimic, but what that connection was remained a mystery. I still hadn't been able to figure out why he lied about buying that watch. Like a pale zombie wandering alone through a bright, immaculate graveyard, I continued to roam Yokohama in pursuit of a nonexistent hope.

I had reached just one conclusion but hadn't told a soul. It didn't feel right. I was sure Dazai had come to the same conclusion himself, but he probably wasn't telling anyone, either.

Disappearing at almost the same time Mimic appeared, lying about a business trip to create an alibi, the gun in the safe and the Mimic sniper who tried desperately to get it back—Ango Sakaguchi was a Mimic spy.

It would all make sense, then.

Mimic bought Ango to get inside knowledge on the Mafia.

I shook my head. There was no way that was right. If that were the case, then that meant Ango was a capable enough spy to have deceived even the likes of Dazai and the boss. He would put a government agent to shame. What would Mimic gain from sending such a skilled spy to infiltrate the Mafia?

"You look glum, Odasaku. What's wrong? Constipated?" the restaurant owner called out to me.

"I'm just thinking. I'd avoid eating spicy food like curry if I were actually constipated."

I was indeed eating curry over rice at a diner.

"Oh... Yeah, I guess you're right. Hey, Odasaku, you don't get mad when people ask that kinda stuff when you're eating curry?"

"I don't know," I answered. "Should I?"

"Uh... I dunno."

“Seriously?” I responded with a straight face.

“Just don’t push yourself too hard, Odasaku.”

I knew the restaurant owner pretty well. He was in his fifties with a stomach protruding so far that he probably couldn’t see his own toes when he stood upright. Some of his hair had checked out, and he had crow’s-feet from smiling so much. He always wore a yellow apron that fit him so well that I sometimes wondered if he was born in it.

I ate curry here around three times a week out of pure habit. Habits are peculiar. If I didn’t eat this curry for a few days, my mouth would dry up strangely, and I couldn’t focus. I’d seen more than my share of drug addicts in the underworld, so I couldn’t help but think this was how they felt every time they went through withdrawals.

“How’s the curry?”

“Same as always.”

The curry here was simple: vegetables boiled down to a buttery consistency, beef tendon sautéed with garlic, a light dashi stock. The ingredients were then cooked with a complex blend of spices and dumped on top of a large helping of white rice before being all mixed together. Toss in an egg and some sauce, and it was ready to be eaten.

My hunger fully sated, I helped myself to a cup of coffee as I basked in my own personal bliss. That’s when I asked, “How are the kids?”

“Haven’t changed,” the owner replied while wiping a dinner plate with a cloth. “They’re practically a small gang. There’s only five of them, so they’re scraping by. But if there were five more, they’d probably be able to hold up the Japan Bank for International Cooperation. They’re on the second floor. Go say hello.”

I decided to go with his suggestion. The floor above the restaurant used to be an old conference space until it was remodeled for residential use. I climbed up the stairs. The concrete walls were pasted with stained wallpaper and had reinforcing rods sticking out here and there. When I reached the top, I saw two doors: one to the kids’ room and one to the stockroom. I chose the former.

“Yo. How’ve ya been?”

I greeted the kids, each one focused intently on passing time in various ways: reading picture books, drawing, throwing a soft, fist-sized ball against the wall, playing cat’s cradle. The youngest of the bunch was a four-year-old girl, and the oldest was a nine-year-old boy. Nobody looked up.

“You guys aren’t causing too much trouble for Pops, right? He’s ex-military, really tough. So if you guys complain too much, he’s gonna—”

I was teasing the kids when I noticed something: There were supposed to be five of them, but I saw only four. I sensed something

move in the bunk bed on the right. I instantly dropped my hips, lowering my posture. A nimble figure leaped out from the shadows on the bed—the fifth kid. I ducked my head and dodged him.

However, he was just a decoy. The little girl, who had been drawing, latched on to my right leg as I was caught off-balance. This was their plan from the start. I lifted my one free leg to step forward in preparation for the real attack that was about to come, but I couldn't move; the string that was being used for cat's cradle up until a second ago was now drawn right across my path of movement. It was a trap. My ankle got caught on the thick, taut string, and I lost my footing, causing me to flounder uselessly in midair.

I grabbed on to the bunk bed with my right hand and avoided falling to the floor, but the kids had predicted that outcome, too. They had colored in the bed's handrails with crayons until they were slick, and my right hand slid off. Both of my hands hit the floor. I instinctively tried to get back up, but unfortunately for me, I'd left my back momentarily wide-open to the kiddie gang. There was no way they would let this opportunity go by. I could feel the seven- and eight-year-old boys lunging at me from behind. If I let them get me now, I'd soon be no different from a prisoner marching to the guillotine—I could see it. I needed to teach them just how frightening the real Mafia was.

I swiftly knocked the ball rolling by my side with the back of my hand, bouncing it off the wall and hitting the seven-year-old right in the face. Unable to see his target anymore, he landed on the floor and took cover. Next, I pulled my ankle free, tearing the string trap apart before putting my weight on my left leg. When I lifted my right leg high into the air, the kid latched on to it squealed with joy and dropped to the floor. All that was left was the eight-year-old lunging at me from behind, but he alone wouldn't be able to hold me down. I stood up with him hanging on to my back.

The agile kid, the one who'd been hiding in the bed, was the gang's leader. Even after witnessing the unsightly defeat of his men, he still boldly went for the attack. Since this was his plan all along, he couldn't back down no matter how obviously hopeless it was.

I caught the leader as he tried to charge me head-on. He made an admirable attempt to grab my legs and knock me off-balance, but there was just too much of a weight difference. Seizing him under the arms, I lifted him up, turned him upside down, and shook him. He bleated like a goat with a hangover.

"Give up?" I asked.

"Never!" he screamed.

With no will to fight, the others simply watched to see how much longer their leader could maintain his dignity as commander in chief.

“Then it looks like some Mafia-style torture is in order.”

With both hands under his armpits, I tickled the kid as if there were no tomorrow.

“Hya-ha-ha! W-wai— Ha-ha-hee-hee-hee!”

It took two minutes and forty-two seconds before he agreed to my terms of surrender.



I talked to the children for some time after that. Apparently, life at the restaurant was passable for the most part, but they were rather displeased with the food menu rotating every three days. They demanded swift improvement, or at least permission to be in the kitchen.

“Pops is nice, but...,” the oldest boy said. “Like, he treats us all like kids, but we’re all adults here, ya know? Is us growin’ up so quickly a problem for the adults or something?”

I told him that it probably was.

“We’re gonna get you next time!” the kids proclaimed, to which I responded that I was looking forward to it—and I honestly was. After that, I retired from the second floor. When I returned to the restaurant, I heard a new customer’s voice—a familiar one at that.

“Whoa! This is spicy, mister! Really spicy! What’s your secret ingredient? Lava?!”

“Ha-ha-ha, ya think so? That’s what Odasaku always has. Hey, Odasaku, welcome back. How were the kids?”

“It was close, but I remain undefeated,” I replied. “However, they predicted where I would grab on to, so they colored it in with crayons to make me slip. I was really worried for a second there. You said they’d be able to hold up a bank if there were ten of them, but I bet they’d be able to pull that off in two more years with their current numbers.”

“Maybe I should recruit them...” Dazai smirked while wiping his sweat. “I heard all about it, Odasaku. You’re raising five kids, huh? And not only that, they’re orphans from the Dragon’s Head Conflict.”

Even if I’d tried to hide it, Dazai would’ve been able to figure it out with just half a day’s worth of research.

“Yeah.” I nodded.

The children were orphans. They would have all died if I hadn’t saved them. Two years ago, various syndicates, including the Port Mafia, were involved in a large-scale underground dispute known as the Dragon’s Head Conflict. A certain skill user died, leaving behind five hundred billion yen’s worth of dirty money, which led to a bloody, murderous frenzy that spread throughout the entire Kanto

region. Most illegal armed organizations came close to extinction as a result.

I also participated in the struggle. It was such a bloodbath that you'd get attacked once every ten minutes just walking the streets. The result was countless scores of bodies.

The children on the second floor were kids who had nowhere to go after the incident was over.

"A Mafia member who refuses to kill, talented yet has no interest in advancing through the ranks, a man who's raising five orphans—Sakunosuke Oda." Dazai smirked. "You're a strange guy. You might be the strangest guy in the entire Mafia."

Not as long as they had Dazai.

I faced the restaurant owner once more and pulled out an envelope of bills from my coat pocket.

"Pops, this should be enough money for the kids for now."

"You sure this is okay, Odasaku?" There was a worried tone in the owner's voice as he wiped his fingers on his apron and accepted the envelope. "I mean, I know most of your earnings end up here... If it's all right, I can throw in some of my money, too."

"I really appreciate you letting us use your place, Pops. That, plus the curry here, is more than enough."

"Odasaku, do you seriously eat this spicy curry all the time?" Dazai asked as he took a sip of water. "It's so hot that my jaw's about to fall off."



“Dazai, what are you doing here anyway?” I asked.

“I have something I need to tell you about the case. A lot of things came to light after we last talked, especially about the enemy.”

There was only one case I knew of.

“Pops, sorry to ask this, but could you give us some privacy?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll be in the back getting things ready, so just holler if we get a customer.”

The owner seemed to have sussed out the situation from my expression alone, and he took off his apron before gleefully heading out the back door. Dazai ended up eating most of his curry while tirelessly downing his cup of water. During that time, I let myself into the kitchen, made some coffee, and poured myself a cup.

“Man, that was hot. Why does curry have to be that hot? Does it have something against mankind? More people would eat it if it were less spicy. This is negligence in food culture.”

I thought about it for a moment before answering. “If more people ate it, then nobody would eat anything else, thus completely destroying food culture as we know it.”

“Makes sense.” Dazai nodded, seemingly convinced.

“So what was it you wanted to tell me?”

“I’ll get straight to the point. It’s a foreign crime syndicate,” he started to explain while pouring another glass of water. “They’ve only been in Japan for a short while. They used to be a well-known European skilled crime syndicate, but an organization of skill users in Great Britain known as the Order of the Clock Tower drove them out of the continent, and they scurried away to Japan.”

“They’re a European criminal organization?”

Europe was home to top-class skill users employed by both the government and various criminal organizations, and as a result, those skill users built an extremely elaborate and complex power structure throughout the continent. That was why such a strict surveillance system had been put in place to prevent such individuals from escaping to other countries.

When I asked Dazai how they could have gotten here, he tilted his head and replied, “Yeah, a crime syndicate of skill users shouldn’t be able to illegally enter another country that easily. There has to be more to this than meets the eye. They might have a collaborator within Japan.”

“But what did they come all the way to Japan for anyway?”

“Beats me. The only way we’ll know is if we ask them. We can guess, though. They escaped to a foreign land without a soul to rely on. This might sound snide, but they’re dead broke. So maybe they’re trying to make it big by stealing the Port Mafia’s turf and smuggling

route.”

It was possible. There's only one thing that poor crime syndicates want: money, money, and more money. But there was just one thing bothering me. I started to open my mouth to express my concerns.

“Hold on. Hear me out until the end.” Dazai stopped me as if he could read my mind. “I know what you want to say, Odasaku. *They're way too skilled* to just be a group of low-level criminals who joined forces, right? I thought the same thing. You almost never see a sniper and spotter operating in tandem around here, let alone so proficiently. Those were ex-military. According to the intel I received, the leader of their organization is a powerful skill user and soldier commanding a seasoned group of men. I should be getting more detailed information soon. Anyway, you can't underestimate these guys. If they systematically attack with such precise tactics, then even the Port Mafia might come tumbling down.”

“Does the boss know about this?”

“I told him,” Dazai reluctantly replied. “He appointed me as commander of the front line and tasked me with devising a strategy for Mimic, so I immediately set up a few traps—simple *mousetraps*. I've got a feeling the enemy might make a move soon.”

Mimic wasn't just going to steal some weapons and try to snipe us—only to then hang their hats up and go home. Dazai was right. They were going to strike again...and it was going to be big.

“This is a really basic question, but...,” I said, then continued, “...shouldn't the government be cracking down on crime syndicates with skill users?”

There were more than a few people in the world with unusual powers, including Dazai and me. The type of skill differs per person, but some are highly dangerous. That was why the government established a special agency to constantly surveil these dangerous individuals in secret. Those government agents, too, are skill users, and highly capable ones at that.

“You mean the Home Affairs Ministry's Special Division for Unusual Powers, right?” Dazai cocked his head. “But see, they're a secret organization, so they don't really show their faces much. Besides, the Port Mafia is a powerful crime syndicate with skill users as well. I bet nothing would make that division happier than if the Mafia and Mimic took each other out.”

Dazai had a point. If the Special Division for Unusual Powers was so obsessed with eradicating crime involving skill users, then they'd have to take out the Port Mafia first. I'd heard from Ango once before that although the Division was a government agency with experienced skill users, they had only a few elites within their ranks; that would make it difficult for them to take a massive organization such as the

Port Mafia head-on and win unscathed. They would most certainly have casualties. Apparently, the Special Division for Unusual Powers was trying to avoid that at all costs, so they stuck to simply keeping an eye on the Port Mafia from a safe distance. Of course, they'd have to bestir themselves if there were a lot of civilian casualties as well.

Only one question remained, although difficult to ask.

"What about Ango?"

Dazai didn't immediately reply, sipping on his freshly brewed cup of coffee in silence. Even he needed time to prepare an answer.

"We're almost completely certain that Ango is the one who leaked the code to the armory," he muttered with eyes downcast on his cup. Then he glanced over at me as if he was trying to see my reaction. I didn't say a word.

"Everyone in the organization is issued a different passcode to avoid trouble. And—"

"The code Mimic used to open the armory matched the one given to Ango, right?"

I crossed my arms. The missing pieces of the puzzle were slowly coming together. The pattern I saw, though, was one I wish I hadn't.

"Hey, Dazai." I took a seat by his side. For a split second, I felt as if I were in a dream. It was as though nothing had changed—just like the other day when I was sitting with Ango and Dazai at the bar. "Is there any possibility that someone framed Ango and is pulling the strings from behind the scenes?"

"It's not out of the question. That's always a possibility," Dazai answered, but he didn't seem to believe the words coming out of his own mouth. "If someone in the Mafia was colluding with Mimic, then sure, it's possible. But I can't think of a single person who'd benefit from that."

Dazai shook his head. I felt the same way. All we could do at that point was find Ango as soon as possible and ask him. Whether that would bring us the results we hoped for was anyone's guess, though.

The Mafia's intelligence officer—Ango Sakaguchi. Why did he betray the syndicate?

During the battle of intelligence in the previous war of the syndicates, there were various barriers preventing members of enemy organizations from turning to the opposing side: money, the opposite sex, family, pride, a sense of belonging. From what I'd heard, if all of these barriers were cleared, then the enemy would most definitely defect. So what would've been Ango's reason to join Mimic?

I looked to Dazai in search of an answer. He was hanging his head, contemplating in silence. His expression was...

Dazai was...

"...Ha-ha-ha."

...laughing.

"At first, I just thought they were your average crime syndicate, but if they're good enough for Ango to join, then that means a little arm-twisting isn't gonna make them cry and say they're sorry. Plus, Ango's no pushover as an enemy. He's no walk in the park. This is getting exciting. I bet they're gonna back me into a corner, then—"

"Dazai."

He paused when I called his name. I didn't have anything else to say, though; I simply said his name.

Nobody knew what Dazai was really thinking.

It's an unwritten rule in the Mafia to not stick your nose where it doesn't belong. One must never open the door to another's heart and try to judge them for the darkness tucked within. That was one nice thing about the Mafia.

But maybe, just maybe, that was the wrong approach—or at the very least, when it came to the man sitting next to me. Somebody probably should've tied him up, pried his chest open, and stuffed a vacuum cleaner inside. Then, as he screamed and cried until they needed to punch him to shut him up, they'd suck every last bit out of his chest and stamp it into the ground.

But in reality, such a vacuum didn't exist. Chests don't open up like that, and no one is capable of such feats. What we see is everything, and everything we see, we ignore. All we can do is stand before the deep ditch between us and others and keep silent.

"Well, I should get going," Dazai said before standing.

"Dazai." He turned around when I called out to him. Rubbing my hands together, I looked down at the empty plate and coffee cup, then back up. "Are you thinking that way because—?"

Out of nowhere, Dazai's cell phone began to ring. He lightly bowed to me before placing the phone against his ear and answering. A few moments went by as he listened to whoever was on the other side, but soon enough, his lips suddenly twisted into a grin.

"All right."

He hung up, then faced me once more before saying:

"We caught a mouse in our trap."



There was no distinction between day and night in the Yokohama Settlement.

What was once the living quarters for a former occupying army was now a joint settlement with strong influences left over from the foreign consul. On paper, the Japanese military police and the consul police worked together to maintain public order within the

Settlement. However, the law's particulars were incredibly ambiguous, leading to countless gray areas. Numerous military parties, financial conglomerates, and criminals gathered here from all over the world like moths to a flame in order to benefit from these loopholes.

Even the MP cannot carelessly dabble in the Settlement's affairs. It's virtually an extraterritorial "Demon City," which is one reason why Yokohama gained public notoriety for acting as the largest base for criminals with skills.

In one corner of this Demon City was an underground casino run by the Port Mafia. It was neither glamorous nor luxurious, but instead rather plain and ambiguous; it basically blended into the scenery. At least, that was how it appeared. But there was a reason for that. All the gambling done inside was illegal.

The casino was located beneath a shipyard and had a horde of Mafia guards on patrol. Patrons who visited were top-class financiers, politicians, military officers, and the like. The doorman wearing a double-breasted coat escorted the customers. Inside the underground casino was a chandelier, illuminating the damask wallpaper, wooden mosaic flooring, and shag carpeting. Various equipment stood like reticent sentinels: a jukebox playing jazz music from the Prohibition era, a roulette board, and a blackjack table. With their drinks in one hand, people casually squandered their money while enjoying secret conversations. A middle-aged bartender silently made cocktails behind the bar set in the corner.

That was when the unexpected suddenly happened. Soldiers draped in gray rags soundlessly appeared from the back door and began firing their submachine guns. Fragments of the chandelier and walls scattered into the air, raining over the customers' heads. Like a flock of sheep struck by a bolt of lightning, the customers stampeded into each and every direction, wildly stomping over and on one another to escape. That was the first thing the soldiers were going for.

In the heat of the confusion, the croupiers swiftly grabbed the machine pistols they'd hidden away, but before they could even aim, the soldiers' suppressive fire pierced their chests and brought them to their knees. The five soldiers immediately cut across the casino floor and rushed into the manager's room in the back. They promptly disposed of the manager, then ripped the carpet off the floor.

Embedded in the floor was a large electric safe. One of the soldiers took out a notepad and punched in the numbers written in it on the electronic keypad. A gear deep inside the safe made a heavy clicking sound, and the door opened. The soldiers took a peek inside.

The safe was empty.

Their astonishment was as clear as day. Almost instantaneously, an electronic alert howled throughout the building, and fireproof

shutters slammed to the ground with a heavy clang. The soldiers, aware of what was going on, shot the shutters, but the thick screens were designed to withstand bullets. After a few seconds, the ceiling sprinklers went off, sending a liquid over the soldiers, the croupiers, and even the patrons who couldn't get away.

The liquid wasn't water, however; it was a white substance that almost immediately evaporated when it came into contact with clothes or the floor. The patrons and employees, who had breathed in the air, began to cough violently. The soldiers promptly held their breath, but it was already too late.

One after another, everyone in the room began to collapse onto the floor. Almost no one was able to do anything of use. They simply clasped their throats, bent forward, and passed out. The white substance was just a type of knockout gas that affected the respiratory system; it wasn't fatal.

However, the one soldier who had the most accurate grasp of the situation shot himself in the head. His blood and brain matter sprayed the wall, leaving a pattern that symbolized the last moment of his life. The remaining soldiers, on the other hand, lacked the clarity of mind to act on the spur of the moment. And just like the casino patrons, they fell to the ground.

There was only one difference between the patrons and the soldiers: The latter would never be allowed the luxury of a peaceful death.



I visited a small accounting firm by the coast. Ango used to work here in his early days before he became a top-secret intelligence agent. Everyone starts at the bottom of the pecking order sometime in their life.

Once I arrived at the office, I told them why I came. The guard and administrator both beamed as they escorted me to the back. The Mafia's not all steel, guns, and explosives. These kinds of people are necessary, too.

This place was used as an accounting facility that washed the dirty money the Mafia brought in illegally. Three years ago, Ango was headhunted by the Mafia and worked here as an assistant.

The guard and the admin ended up bringing me to a windowless room hidden behind a wall. It was a dim space with secret Mafia assets, money-laundering ledger sheets, and other records stuffed in bookshelves lined up against the wall, plus a desk in the middle. There was nothing else except for a bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling, faintly wobbling.

“There ya go. Now if ya don’t mind, I’ll be gettin’ back to work,” came the administrator’s husky voice once he’d taken me to the bookshelves.

He claimed he had work to do, but I’d glanced into the room next door earlier and saw that his desk was covered in bonsai plants and a book on shogi—nothing else.

“Thank you very much.” I expressed my gratitude. “By the way, there’s a bit of burgeoning conflict unfolding at headquarters right now. Please be careful.”

“The only things here are old documents and stacks of securities that can’t be cashed. Attacking this place would just be a hassle.”

The administrator smirked. He had been the treasurer in charge of the Mafia’s finances for years. Perhaps he could instinctively sense where the sparks of war would land.

“This is a nice workplace.” After surveying the room, I called out to the administrator as he was leaving, “Maybe I should ask to be transferred here.”

The skin on his face crinkled as his lips curled into a grin.

“Most young’uns who say that don’t even last three days before they head for the hills. It’s boring here.”

After thanking the administrator for his time, I faced the open bookshelves once more. Angelo’s records were here. Accountants have always been the epitome of meticulousness itself, but the people who manage the Mafia’s under-the-table accounts must be capable of writing out in detail everything that happens during the course of business. That way, even if they’re killed, the successor can take over for them without delay. I flipped through the business logs of the prior accountant. He was apparently well organized, even more than your average accountant, but just one single month of records alone was like reading a full-length novel—basically one long lyric poem about the underbelly of society.

I sat behind the desk in the middle of the hidden room and leafed through the documents. According to the records, Angelo used to be a kind of hacker who bought and sold information. In the past, he drew out a scheme where he would work together with a gang to steal money from a corporation. They pretended they worked for the bank, opened the safe-deposit box, then swiped all the securities to exchange for cash. The plan was a complete success, so Angelo and his team made quite a bit of money. But it was money stained in blood. The safe-deposit box and securities belonged to one of the Mafia’s front companies; Angelo and his men basically swiped money right out of the Mafia’s pockets. Unsurprisingly, Angelo was chased by hounds after that—armed mad dogs in black that tailed their prey through the night without so much as a howl or even a single sound.

Mentally exhausted and being fed misinformation, the gang grew suspicious of one another, leading to a shoot-out and their quick demise. Ango, on the other hand, continued to run. He was able to figure out in advance where the Mafia's tracking unit would be next, allowing him to simply escape their reach throughout Yokohama. No less than six months went by.

For those six months, Ango managed to outsmart the Mafia's tracking unit who knew Yokohama like the back of their hand, something that would've even put a government spy to shame. He was most likely somehow using the Mafia's intelligence network in secret and leaking misinformation to confuse his enemies.

But there's an end of the road for everybody. Nobody can evade the darkness of the night forever. Ango must have been prepared to die when he was captured in the slum's underground aqueduct. Instead, he was brought before the boss, who wasn't willing to dispose of someone with such outstanding information-manipulation skills.

That was the start of Ango's second life.

—That was the first dramatic step of the man's rise in the underworld. From what I can see in these files, there's not even a shadow of Mimic in his background.

...Which meant Mimic and Ango didn't have any contact until after this.

I flipped through the files some more until I found an account that caught my eye. Two years ago, Ango went to Europe for business after he had been in the Mafia for a year and gained their trust. His objective was to close a deal with a local stolen car broker. However, Ango ceased communication for those two months for unknown reasons. He didn't seem any different once he returned, and he explained that some sort of misunderstanding with a local organization had led to his getting pursued as a criminal. And his story checked out, too. After looking into it, I discovered there actually was a mass arrest in Europe of organizations that smuggled stolen vehicles. The Port Mafia came to the conclusion that Ango must have gotten caught up in that, so no more questions were asked of him.

But in retrospect, it was hard to believe that Ango was on the run for two months because he couldn't clear up such a simple misunderstanding. Nobody could confirm what Ango did during that period in Europe. With what I learned, I could only assume he used this time to meet with Mimic and come to some sort of deal—in other words, as a double agent. That would've meant Mimic had already been laying the groundwork to attack the Port Mafia from that moment on.

I closed the files, then sank deep into my thoughts to meditate.

The room was dead silent. The only noises I heard were the sounds of passing cars, like a film far away. Something was off. Something about this scenario bothered me. Ango joined the Mafia, then secretly communicated with Mimic. From there, he waited for just the right time for both syndicates to clash. It was too perfect, like two computers playing chess. There were no signs of any unexpected actions, no curveballs...and that conversely made me uneasy.

I surveyed the room, thinking back to how Ango used to work here. That day, he had been in the same spot I was in at that very moment. Ango had been sitting in the chair with his elbows on the desk, his expression glum as he'd stared at me in silence.

This was where we first met. Ango was arrogant back then. He practically oozed displeasure, the bored expression on his face plainly illustrating that he didn't feel he belonged in a place like this. I thought back to the way he'd looked at me. What did he say to me when we first met again? I believe it was...



"Could you please not get any closer? You smell," he said with disgust and his elbows still on the desk. Dazai and I couldn't even say a word as we stood stock-still by the door. An awkward silence descended over the hidden room.

I had heard around that this young man was the new guy, Ango Sakaguchi, but this was the first time I was actually meeting him. Dazai and I exchanged glances. We did indeed smell terrible. After all, we were on our way back from a mission. We must've reeked of oil, rust, and blood. My nose had given up sending signals to my brain a long time ago.

It was the middle of the Dragon's Head Conflict. There was nary a night when you didn't hear gunfire, and practically every drop of sewage water had been tainted with blood. The bodies of underground syndicate members piled up in every corner of the city. Even the MP couldn't put a stop to it all, never mind come up with the manpower to inspect the crime scenes.

Dazai and I were given orders to clean up the fallen Port Mafia members' bodies. We would photograph the corpses, then take their possessions back with us. We couldn't afford to have the police take anything as evidence in their attempt to curb organized crime.

Nevertheless, it wasn't a job you could afford to obsess over too much in the throes of war. What's more, all the gunfights took place at the Yokohama Settlement's waste-disposal site. That was where sludge and industrial waste oil were typically dumped illegally, and the police never went anywhere near it, let alone the neighboring

residents.

And that was why Dazai and I were covered in oil and mud. The lingering stench was enough to send a stray cat on the other side of town running in the opposite direction.

At one point during our mission, Dazai had told me with an uncomfortable grimace, “It smells so bad that I want to cut my nose off.”

Glancing at us, Ango spoke bluntly. “Put their belongings on my desk, then stand back. Don’t open your mouth unless I ask you something.”

We did as we were told.

“You’re the new guy, right?” Dazai piped up. “Sorry, but can I use your shower? As you so politely pointed out, we smell awful—”

“I told you to keep quiet.”

Ango cut Dazai off, causing him to fall silent with his mouth agape. The other half of the sentence Ango had wrested from him idly hung in the air.

Regardless of how young he may have looked, Dazai was the leading candidate for the next executive. While Ango may have been a new hire at the accounting firm, that didn’t excuse his behavior.

He pulled the items out of the bags we gave him and began to inspect them one by one. IDs, keys, phones, knives, guns, pictures—he checked each item while recording them in his account book.

I had no idea what Ango was doing. I fully believed the evidence would be incinerated after checking them off with the names of the deceased. However, the new guy was inspecting each and every item, writing them down. Just what was he doing?

“What are you doing?” My curiosity got the best of me.

“How many times do I have to ask you to be quiet?” Ango replied as his pencil glided over the notepad. “Isn’t it obvious? I’m creating logs, of course.”

“I see,” I replied.

“Tell us your name!” Dazai suddenly yelled, causing me to jump in surprise. Ango’s eyes flicked over toward Dazai. Then, after a few moments of silence, he replied, “Ango...Sakaguchi.”

“Heh-heh-heh-heh...” Dazai began to chuckle, smiling from ear to ear for some reason.

“...What’s with the nauseating laugh?”

“You’re quite the interesting fellow, Ango. Doing that isn’t going to make the boss happy. In fact, it’s just going to cost more money and create extra work, never mind help you move up in the ranks.”

“Are you saying you know what I’m doing?” Ango asked with more than a hint of surprise on his face.

“You’re making records of the lives of the deceased. Am I right?”

Ango was caught off guard, his eyes wide in shock as if he'd just realized Dazai was there.

"When did you peek inside my logbooks?"

"I didn't have to. It's pretty obvious what you're doing."

I had no idea what made it so obvious, but stuff like this always happened when I was with Dazai, so I just quietly watched the scene play out. Dazai walked straight over to Ango with no regard for his reaction.

"The more violent this war becomes, the more the deceased start to just look like numbers. How many died yesterday? How many died today? The line between human losses and those of money and equipment begin to blur. There is no individual, no soul, and no dignity to death. But you're fighting back against that. Anyway, could you read us one?"

Ango glared at Dazai in irritation for a few moments, but he eventually lowered his gaze to the files and began reading.

"Four of ours perished yesterday during the attack near the waste site: Kurehito Umeki, Shoukichi Saegusa, Miroku Ishige, and Kazuma Utagawa... Umeki was a former MP officer who was stigmatized and kicked out of the force for allegedly killing his colleague. He joined the Mafia soon after and proved to be a skilled leader in battle. He even led this small group. Umeki had already lost his parents prior to these events. He has a brother many years younger, but they haven't been in contact. Whether he really killed his colleague is now forever a mystery never to be solved... Next is Saegusa. He succeeded his father in the Mafia and had been involved with the organization ever since he was a child. He had a way of calming situations down and was apparently loved by the shop owners on our turf. His dream was to become an executive... Now we have Ishige. She was a former sex worker who had been caring for her sick parents. She had poor eyesight but an excellent sense of hearing, which allowed her to hear the enemies coming before they attacked. Ishige likely played a huge role in the survival of many of our members... The final victim, Utagawa, was originally an assassin for an enemy syndicate that became a Mafia subsidiary when they were nearly wiped out. Utagawa is survived by his wife and kids, who do not know of his life of an assassin nor his association with the Mafia. Perhaps they will never know."

I imagined the lives of the four departed as I listened to Ango. While I couldn't vividly see them, I felt closer to them and their existence, which was no more.

Ango closed his book, then said, "They all found peace. Nobody can take that away from them. The information in this book is evidence of their lives and the legacy of people who will never be

recorded as simply 'four deaths' in a report. I started collecting this data in between jobs, and I have created the same records for all eighty-four people in the Port Mafia who died since the conflict began."

I found myself in mute amazement. It was difficult to even imagine how much work that must have been.

"Does the boss know about this—about the fact that you're collecting and recording data that has no strategic value?" I asked.

"Yes, I gather the files together every week and shove them in the boss's hands myself. He was annoyed at first, but now he feels that this is 'a valuable source of information for truly understanding the state of the entire organization.' He has come to enjoy reading them."

What he'd started as a side project between jobs turned into his main responsibility, one directly handed to him from the boss. I guess that explained why the boss gave orders to Dazai, a candidate for the next executive, to rummage through dead bodies.

"Fascinating, isn't it, Odasaku?" Dazai brazenly patted Ango on the back. "There's really nobody in the Mafia like this—a true waste of talent."

"I told you to stay back. You're going to make me start smelling." Ango grimaced.

"Don't you agree, Odasaku? Don't you just wanna read these records?"

I nodded, then replied, "Name your price. I'll buy them off you."

"They're not for sale! Why are you even bothering me anyway?! I'm busy, you know! And you smell like rotten *tsukudani*!"

"C'mon, what's a little rotten simmered fish between us? Besides, it goes great with sake."

"Really? I had no idea."

"No, they don't! How can you lie about that so brazenly?!"

"B-but...it really does...taste good, y'know?"

"I didn't mean you should be more timid about it!"

"I could really go for a drink now."

"Good thinking! Let's go to the usual place. We can even take this apprentice accountant with us while we're at it. How does that sound?"

"Perfect."

"I said I'm busy, so—"

"Odasaku, there's only one way to save this man from his busyness. All we have to do is hug him tight from each side, covering him with mud, oil, and our putrid smell. That way, he physically won't be able to work anymore today!"

"Good point."

"Wh-what?! Are you threatening me?!"

“New guy, the Mafia doesn’t threaten. We *murder*. Oh, Odasaku, take the right side, will ya?”

“Sure thing.”

“W-wait! These are my best clothes! S-stop! You’re going to make me angr— Aaah!”

.....

We all gathered at the bar after that and got to know one another. There were no bosses or subordinates present; the three of us basically acted as equals. We drank, and we talked. That’s it. We talked about the city, about liquor, about the people we’ve met. It wasn’t as if we were passionately discussing some special topic we wanted to share, but even then, we didn’t run out of things to chat about. We were like soldiers who had by chance run into one another on the desert battlefield, crowded around a campfire together, quietly exchanging something or other and drinking, just sharing a moment of one another’s time.

In the world we live in, finding these types of relationships are rare, like coming upon a golden palace in the middle of a dense forest. If this relationship were to ever be broken, there would be no second chance to build something like this with anyone else ever again.

But then...

The old-fashioned pistol. The code to the safe.

Our relationship was beginning to visibly crumble at an alarming rate.

× × ×

Dazai walked down a set of stairs leading to a dim basement. A white mist silently seeped in through the cracks in the stone wall, making the chamber hazy as if it were underwater. The walls were moist and black, dimly glittering after absorbing countless screams and despair.

This was the Mafia’s underground prison. Many entered alive, but very few left that way. Scores of people were taken down here for various reasons, among them the large number of instruments of torture available, the extreme difficulty involved in rescuing prisoners, and the simple fact that it was just a bit easier to clean up any mess and blood in the basement.

Dazai walked through the prison in silence as he headed toward the special prisoners’ cell. It was nothing more than a single room of around thirty-six square yards. The only entrance and exit was a short iron door; there wasn’t even a window to let the light in. Shackles and chains like those of a medieval jail hung from the wall.

There were three dead bodies in the middle of the cell—all relatively fresh. Their blood slowly spread across the floor, as if fruitlessly struggling to escape from the gloomy chamber. The ones who died here were Mimic soldiers. They had lost consciousness after breathing in knockout gas at the casino, and the Mafia had taken them here to be tortured.

“Tell me what happened,” Dazai said.

Four Mafia members were also in the cell, three of whom were Dazai’s subordinates who had helped fight against the sniper in the back alley. The fourth was a short, lean boy robed in a black overcoat.

“We used sleeping gas to knock out the Mimic’s vanguard when they attacked our casino, and then we brought them here,” one suited subordinate replied, pushing up his sunglasses. “We planned on torturing them for info on their allegiances, and we even removed the poison tucked away in their molars so they couldn’t kill themselves.”

“Yes, I’ve got that much. This was my plan, after all. What I want to know is what happened next.”

“One of the soldiers woke up quicker than we expected...” The one in sunglasses started stumbling over his words. “Before we could shackle him...he grabbed one of our guns and killed his men...just to make sure they wouldn’t talk. Then he attacked us, and—”

“I executed him.” The young boy in the black overcoat finished the mafioso’s sentence. Dazai looked at the boy, whose wide eyes glared back. “Is there a problem?”

“I see... No, there’s no problem.” Staring right into the boy’s eyes, Dazai continued, “You defeated an unyielding, formidable enemy and protected your allies, Akutagawa. Good work.”

Dazai began walking toward the boy in the black overcoat, the one he’d called Akutagawa. “Only your skill can defeat such a powerful enemy in one hit. Impressive. I wouldn’t expect any less from a subordinate of mine. Thanks to you, all three of the enemies we captured are dead—enemies I set a trap for and worked really hard to capture alive. Now we’re back to square one without a clue. If at least one of them were still living, we could’ve gotten some valuable information: where their base is, what they want, what’s their next target, who their leader is, where this leader came from, what this leader’s skill is... You really did us a favor.”

“Information? I’ll just slice every one of them into pieces until—”

Dazai suddenly *punched Akutagawa in the face*, preventing him from finishing his sentence. Akutagawa flew back onto the ground, his head bouncing off the stone flooring with a thud.

“Perhaps I made it look like I wanted to hear excuses. Sorry for the misunderstanding,” Dazai said while rubbing his knuckles.

“Urgh...”

Akutagawa moaned. He'd hit his head so hard that he couldn't even stagger to his feet.

"Give me your gun," Dazai ordered one of his men. The subordinate was hesitant but nonetheless handed over his weapon. Next, Dazai removed the magazine from the automatic pistol, took out all but three bullets, and then put the magazine back in. He immediately pointed the gun at Akutagawa, who was still on the ground.

"I have this friend who's supporting several orphans all on his own, you see," he continued, his weapon still drawn and aimed at the boy. "Akutagawa, I'm sure Odasaku would've been patient enough to give you the guidance you needed had he been the one who'd found you on the brink of starvation in the slums. That would have been the 'right' thing to do. But 'righteousness' doesn't take very kindly to me. And there's only one thing people like me do to useless subordinates."

Dazai mercilessly pulled the trigger the moment he finished his sentence.

Three gunshots. Three flashes of light. Three empty shells tinkled across the floor.

"....."

Sweat dripped down Akutagawa's forehead.

"See? You really can do it if you put your mind to it."

The bullets were *floating motionlessly right in front of Akutagawa*. He had used his skill to stop them. Yet, despite that, his expression indicated he was struggling.

"I've told you this over and over again," Dazai said, amused. "Your skill isn't just for slicing up poor prisoners. You can use it to defend yourself, too."

Akutagawa's skill, *Rashomon*, allowed him to control his black overcoat like another life-form, transforming it into fangs or blades to cut through his opponents. Dazai had also theorized that his skill could even rupture space itself, thus blocking incoming bullets.

"Until now...I've never successfully used it to block."

Akutagawa's voice was lifeless, hoarse. He'd used most of his mental strength to create an interruption in space.

"But look at you now. You did it. I'm so happy for you."

Akutagawa scowled. A look of severe tension shot across his face, almost exploding with emotion.

"Next time you mess up, I'm punching you twice and shooting five times. Got it?"

Dazai's voice was colder than ice. Akutagawa tried to say something back, but Dazai's stern gaze pressured him into silence.



“Now that I’m done educating my incompetent underling, it’s time to get to work. Let’s check the bodies. We might be able to find something.”

After giving orders to the three subordinates at his side, one timidly spoke up.

“So...what exactly do you want us to check?”

“Everything! Isn’t it obvious?” Dazai cried in exasperation. “We need to find something that might lead us to their hideout. Anything could be a clue: the soles of their shoes, the trash in their pocket, food crumbs from whatever they ate, adhesives stuck to their clothes—everything. Tsk... My lackeys seem to think beating the enemy to death is all the Mafia does. Odasaku’s gonna solve everything all by himself at this rate.”

“Sakunosuke Oda... I know that guy,” the subordinate with sunglasses added hesitantly. “Dazai, sir, I don’t mean to be rude, but... I saw him sweeping behind the office the other day. A man of his status isn’t qualified to be your friend, let alone contend with an enemy like this.”

Dazai stared, flabbergasted, at his underling.

“Are you joking? Odasaku’s *not qualified?*” Dazai asked, thoroughly surprised.

“Yes...”

The other men nodded as well.

“You fools!”

Dazai’s lips curled into a sneer in genuine disgust. “Listen, I’m telling you guys this for your own good. Do not make Odasaku angry—no matter what you do. If you were to anger him—truly, deeply upset him—then *all five people in this room would be dead before anyone could even draw their guns.*”

The subordinates were at a loss for words. Even Akutagawa stared at Dazai with a tense expression on his face.

“When he’s serious, Odasaku’s scarier than anyone in the entire Mafia. Akutagawa, you could train for a hundred years, and you still wouldn’t be able to beat him.”

“...That is absurd...,” Akutagawa muttered, his voice stifled. “... That’s impossible. Are you saying that I—?”

But Dazai just ignored him.

“Now, let’s get to work! Our enemy might be a pain, but if we don’t sort this out soon, the Special Division for Unusual Powers is gonna show up to put the fire out, and we don’t want that.”

His hands still on the stone floor, Akutagawa merely glared at Dazai.

“...”

His spiteful gaze was aimed at not only Dazai, but even Akutagawa himself.



I left the accounting firm thinking about Ango, the man slowly slipping into evil somewhere in town. Or perhaps we, the Mafia, were the bad guys while Ango and Mimic were on the side of justice trying to bring us down. I started to believe that this hypothesis actually made even more sense than the others. Dazai, the boss, me, everyone in the Mafia—maybe we all deserved to die burdened with sin, solitude, and remorse. For all I knew, that could've been proof of the righteousness of this world. Those thoughts plagued my mind from the moment I departed the firm until I got a call from Dazai not long after.

“Hey, Odasaku. I know this is sudden, but we got a clue. I need you to go somewhere for me right now.”

According to him, the Mimic soldiers' shoes had multiple dead leaves stuck on them from a certain perennial broadleaf that didn't lose its leaves during that period. The entire plant would have to be withering for the leaves to fall, but perennials would not die so easily. Therefore, one conceivable possibility was that an herbicide was used to kill it.

From there, Dazai's men searched for specialists who had used herbicides to get rid of trees those past few months. As a result, they found one shop around Yokohama that did in fact remove the same kind of broadleaves. Workers had cleared a bunch of them from the side of the road for a land readjustment project, part of which included expanding a traffic tunnel.

The area was in the mountains and void of any real landmarks. The only facility nearby was a weather observation station that had been abandoned over a decade ago. Nobody dared go near. It slowly fell apart, fading with time. The building was large, isolated, and capable of storing goods and resources. It was the perfect hideout for a group like Mimic, all alone in a foreign country with no one to turn to.

Night was not far off. I drove down the highway toward my destination as violet and cerise quarreled in the sky over the horizon. Somewhere off in the distance, I heard the sound of seabirds squawking.

I stopped my car along a dirt trail that cut into the mountains and got out. From there, I trotted through the thick weedy path until I eventually saw a reinforced concrete building in the darkness, bathing in the crimson glow of twilight.

It was a three-story abandoned building. Ivy crawled up what were once white walls, which had been battered with rain, the sea breeze, and the passage of time. Most of the paint was now gone. In the center of the building was an observation tower for monitoring the sky, topped with a spherical observation room that seemed to have been added more for aesthetics than for anything else.

Since the dirt and trees absorbed most sounds, the area was completely silent as if it were floating in outer space. I didn't get the feeling there were many people hiding inside. After a moment's thought, I decided to investigate the run-down building myself before Dazai's men would arrive. I had a hunch, and if this hunch was correct, then I should've been able to find information on Ango there, and that information was probably something I shouldn't show anyone else in the Mafia.

Pushing through the weeds, I entered the building. There was nothing on the first floor...if you ignored the loose floor tiles, rusted chairs, and dead beetles scattered about. The evening sun peeked in through the cracks of the boarded windows, illuminating the dust particles in the air. I discovered a few footprints in the dust and gravel-littered floor—military boots. It appeared a number of people had been coming to this spot as of late.

I had placed a foot on the staircase to the second floor, which looked as if it could come crumbling down at any moment, when I heard a sound coming from somewhere in the building. It was very faint, only about as loud as a kitten rolling on its back. I strode up the staircase, but I didn't see a soul on the second floor. No signs of anyone on the third floor, either. It was just as I thought. I rushed upstairs, climbing the observation tower that connected to the observation room.

As I entered a small room at the top of the stairs, I found someone tied to a chair and unable to move. That person yelled at me the moment they noticed I was there.

“Odasaku! Stay back!”

I ignored his command and ran over. That man—Ango—struggled to free his hands, which had been tightly tied behind his back, but the rope didn't even budge. I slipped behind him and began trying to untie his bonds.

“Why did you come?! The enemies are using this facility as their base!”

“I just got the feeling that you wanted help.”

I started to dismantle the knots—no easy feat.

“I don't need any help!”

“Really?”

I slipped a finger into one of the rope's knots, then tugged at it

with a viselike grip. It loosened slightly.

“Let me guess one of the reasons you’re in trouble. Mimic found out you were a spy. Am I wrong?”

“...! That’s...”

Ango fell silent.

“Everyone in the Mafia thinks you’re a Mimic spy who infiltrated the Mafia. But it’s actually the opposite; Ango Sakaguchi is *a Mafia spy who infiltrated Mimic.*”

Ango instinctively opened his eyes wide and looked at me.

“Mimic was watching your room through a sniper rifle scope to make sure the old pistol inside wouldn’t get stolen. But why didn’t they just snipe the Mafia’s boss and get it over with? The reason is simple: You lied and said you didn’t know where the boss was. But why did you do that? Because the boss decides everything you say and don’t say about the Mafia.”

Ango squeezed his eyes shut. Clenching his teeth, he seemed to be struggled to keep down the emotions bubbling up from within. Before long, he opened his eyes again and said, “Odasaku, please, you have to get out of here. I failed.” Ango signaled to the floor above with his chin. “There’s a time bomb upstairs. Now that they know I betrayed them, they plan on leaving no trace of me.”

“See? I knew you needed my help.” I gave up on trying to untie the knot and pulled out my gun. “Lean as far away from the chair as you can.”

I carefully aimed at the rope’s knot and fired two shots. The entire chair shook as the rope flew off.

“Let’s get out of here. How much time do we have before the bomb goes off?”

“The whole building is coming down any second now!”

Lending Ango my shoulder, we rushed down the staircase. It appeared Ango was slightly roughed up before being bound; he staggered while holding his side. But even then, we sprinted down the stairs so fast that we almost fell. The bomb went off right as we were about to run out the door. The shock wave came first, followed by blasts of hot air swooping down over us.

We leaped out the door headfirst. To be more technical about it, the blast blew us outside headfirst, and we were thrown into the thickets. All the air was squeezed out of my lungs.

Finally, rubble and debris from the building started raining down from the sky. I tried to move out of the way, but the blast from the bomb had rendered my body useless. Fortunately, no heavy chunks of concrete flew our way, and the light boards of the walls were sent flying far into the distance. Still, our backs were uncomfortably pelted with countless bits of gravel both large and small.

It took almost an entire minute before we could start breathing normally again. I coughed as I brushed the rubble off my head. My vision went back and forth from red to white.

“Ango... Are you okay?”

“Yeah, somehow.”

Ango crawled, pulling himself out of the rubble before looking back at the building. I did the same before turning around as well. The second floor up was essentially destroyed, leaving only the charred framework. Even the flooring of the room where Ango was being held prisoner had been blown away. Mimic really went all out on the explosives. They destroyed any evidence we would’ve used to go after them as well.

“How much does our boss know about this?” I asked Ango while trying to catch my breath.

“Almost everything,” he replied. “He’s the only one in the Mafia who knows I infiltrated Mimic. That’s how sensitive this mission is. More people knowing would increase the chances of a leak. This is a fundamental principle when handling secret information.”

“I’ve been had.” I got up, then took a seat on some rubble. “So that’s why the boss ordered me to find you while keeping the truth a secret.”

It was insurance in case Ango’s undercover work went south. He needed a pawn who would save him—someone who knew nothing, wouldn’t deceive anyone, and wouldn’t get suspicious no matter what happened.

“Bombs and close brushes with death aren’t really my thing.”

Ango shook his head, making his bitterness clear.

“At any rate, Mimic was as quick as an arrow to react. They didn’t even give me a chance to take measures to protect myself. Ugh. I can see rainbow-colored stars when I close my eyes. What in the world is this?”

“You get used to it.”

“I have to inform the boss of what happened.” Ango got to his feet. “Mimic’s commander is a dangerous man. He’s coolheaded, has the qualities of a leader, and seeks conflict. He plans on completely annihilating the Mafia, and his men would slit their own throats for him. I even saw someone do it.”

“What’s this leader’s name?” I asked.

“André Gide. He’s a powerful skill user himself. He should be avoided at all costs, especially by you, Odasaku. Whatever you do, do not fight him... By the way, you were the one who found the pistol in the safe in my room, were you not?”

I replied that I was.

“That gun is a symbol. There’s a special design on the hammer

that proves you're a member of Mimic. It took me a year to receive one."

As Ango stood in the midst of the debris with wobbly legs, he quickly turned his gaze to the thickets in the mountains...as if he was trying to look for something there.

"It's too late to stop the war between Mimic and the Mafia. Fighting is all they think about. Moreover, *it doesn't matter to them who they fight*. They'd dance the jitterbug with the hound of Hades if it would take them to their next battlefield. If we don't do something soon, the city will— Ngh!"

The skin around Ango's temple tore, and a trail of blood slowly trickled down his cheek. I handed him a handkerchief, which he thanked me for before using it to apply pressure to the wound.

"Just who are they?"

"They're an army...although I'm sure you already figured that out yourself. They're remnants of an army faction defeated during the previous interorganizational war. These men don't know how to live outside of a battlefield. They're known as *grau geists*—men with no master. Even now, they're obsessed with warfare—" Ango suddenly turned his gaze to the dirt path. "What's that?"

I followed his eyes. A blue *temari* handball, the type kids use to play games, rolled down the gravel slope. Did it get blown over there during the explosion? The ball rolled to my feet, and I picked it up. It was a deep azure. The strings were coming loose, since it was rather old, but there was something about the beautiful geometric pattern that drew me in. I rolled it around in my hand, and when I put my palms together, it fit perfectly between them. I looked at the back side, but there was nothing particularly unique—



The earth suddenly shook. All of a sudden, my gaze met the ground in front of me. The next second, I realized I was falling, and I collapsed face-first, despite placing both my hands out to catch myself. My vision blurred. I felt sick. When I looked at my hands, they were covered in a sticky blue liquid; that ball had been coated in it. The parts of my hand covered in the liquid tingled uncomfortably. Major alarm bells rang wildly in my head.

The vision ended there.

I stood among the debris. The worst thing about the vision ending was that I was *already holding the handball*. I immediately threw it away, but it was too late. I started to feel dizzy just like a moment ago. I rubbed my palms on my coat to wipe off the blue slime, but it had already been absorbed into my skin and infiltrated my body. My skill, *Flawless*, allowed me to see a few seconds—more than five but less than six—into the future in my head. That was how I was able to avoid surprise attacks like sniper fire and explosions.

However, if I were to realize I was in danger after falling into the trap...there was no way for me to avoid it even if I did have a vision just like the moment before. I had been holding the handball for over six seconds. It was too late. Whoever did this knew about my skill inside and out. There weren't many people who did. Nervously sweating, I tried to warn Ango, but I couldn't talk. A dark shadow appeared noiselessly behind him; it was four—no, five people dressed in field tunics as dark as the night with gas masks hiding their faces. They weren't Mimic. None of them were carrying old-fashioned gray pistols, but rather state-of-the-art precision-guided rifles. They were with the Special Forces. One of the men in black tapped Ango on the shoulder. Ango turned around and nodded as if to say he understood.

"Odasaku, I apologize for the trouble I caused you."

Ango walked over and placed the handkerchief I had just given him in my hand. I couldn't brace myself, never mind hold the handkerchief. Ango took a white silk glove out of his pocket, then pulled it over his right hand before picking up the blue handball.

"You are free to speak of everything that happened here. Everything I told you about Mimic was true. I just wish I could have had a drink with you and Dazai one last time at the usual place and time..."

A Special Forces soldier tapped Ango on the arm, seemingly giving him a signal. After responding with his gaze, Ango looked down at me and smiled as if he had given up.

"Take care of yourself."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ango turn his back to me before leaving with the Special Forces. I wasn't even able to move my neck or eyes at that point. The world in front of me was slowly swallowed by darkness. My tongue numb, I called out to Ango as he left, but even I didn't know what I was saying. An indescribable feeling of loneliness was the only thing filling my heart...as if I were floating at the end of the universe.

Even that was swallowed by darkness.

My consciousness faded to black.

CHAPTER III

It had been raining that day. I was sitting. Time slowly, indistinctly passed by, and all sound was drowned out by the vague noise of falling rain. The world itself felt like an apparition. The rain poured down before my eyes at a slant, drenching the scenery and turning everything blue. Fog mixed with ocean mist intertwined with the downpour. The wet landscape and I sat face-to-face, though separated by glass.

I was fourteen years old at the time. I'd been at a café reading a book—an old book. The cover's corners were worn down, and a part of it was torn. The print was old, with some letters faded here and there. I'd found this book after a hit and brought it back with me, since the owner wouldn't be needing it anymore. I turned the pages.

I was a much simpler person at age fourteen. I'd been working as a freelance hit man doing contract assassinations, and not once did I ever fail. The wealthy original owner of this book along with his family were mere stains on the wall at that point. I could no longer remember why I brought this book back with me. Something about it—something slight—had just stuck in the back of my mind. I didn't have a habit of reading books at that stage in my life, but this one was different. It was an old novel. The story took place in a certain town, and it was about a myriad of characters. All the characters, though, were weak and pitiful—even the smallest things caused them panic. But mysteriously enough, it was a very engaging story.

After work, I always went to the same café and sat in the same seat to read this novel. It had become a daily routine, which was why I'd read that book so many times. I was reading it that day, too.

"You're always reading that same book, boy. Is it really that interesting?"

I looked up in the direction of the sudden voice.

Standing before me, straight as a ramrod, was a lanky middle-aged man with a cane and a short mustache that accentuated his faint smile. I'd seen him a few times at this café before. When I told him it was a good book, he looked at me curiously.

"You're a strange lad. There are plenty of stories out in this world that are much more interesting than that novel."

I stared at the man without saying a word. To tell the truth, I

didn't even know how to explain to someone why I read this book so often.

"Where's the last volume?"

I looked at the stack on the table where the first two books lay. There was one major drawback about this novel: I had found only the first two volumes. Therefore, I had no idea how the story concluded. I went to every possible used bookstore I could come by, but I still couldn't find the final volume. I told the man I didn't own it.

"Now it makes sense. You're a lucky kid. The last volume to that series is the worst of the worst. It's so bad that you'll want to wash out your brain once you've finished it. Be happy with just the first two volumes. It's for your own good."

I told him I couldn't do that.

"Then you write what happens next," the man with the mustache said. "That's the only way to preserve its perfection."

I was dumbfounded. I'd never even thought about writing something myself.

"Writing novels is writing people," the man said. "It's about how they live and how they die. From what I can see, you're perfectly qualified."

I couldn't say a word. I didn't feel I had the qualifications he claimed; that day, I had just gotten back from murdering yet another person for work.

But there was something oddly persuasive about what that man said. It was as if brilliant radiance from light-years away glittered in his eyes, and there was a certain firmness to his voice that seemed powerful enough to shake the earth itself. I'd never seen such a person before.

When I'd asked him his name, he had told me, but I'd long since forgotten it.

A few days later, I went back to the café at the same time to find a book lying in my usual seat. Stuck to the cover was a piece of paper that read, "Don't blame me if you regret it."

It was the last volume.

I spent the entire day reading that book.

As for what I thought of it—



I opened my eyes to find myself in bed. Both my hands were wrapped in bandages.

When I sat up, the pain in my back from my close encounter with

the explosion returned. I let out a moan.

I was in a hospital room. It was clean, ordinary, and as silent as a morgue. Standing firm with his feet apart by the door was a man in a black suit and sunglasses. The moment our eyes met, he silently left, apparently to go get someone.

“Hey, Odasaku. You’re awake now, right? How are you feeling?”

Dazai walked into the room with a cheerful smirk.

“I feel like I’ve been hit with the next fifty years’ worth of hangovers,” I replied, then looked around the room. “Did you find Ango?”

“No, my men only found you lying on the ground. They didn’t see any sign of the enemy, not even so much as a shadow. Akutagawa was really frustrated that he couldn’t ‘execute the traitor.’ ...Anyway, Ango really was there, huh?”

I explained everything that happened at the abandoned building, telling him every little detail as it had really occurred.

“Ango’s captivity, the explosion, André Gide, and the Special Forces dressed in black...”

Dazai placed a thumb against his lips, then shifted into a thinking position. He didn’t even move an inch for a full minute after that. Only his eyes wavered, following something only he could see. I waited in silence.

“Things can be mainly classified into two phenomena here.” Dazai finally spoke up. “One is the criminal syndicate Mimic’s attack. The other is Ango and the Special Forces’ secret maneuvers.”

“Are the Special Forces and Mimic different organizations?”

“They are. To be a little more specific, this huge dispute is due to three forces coming together: the Mafia, Mimic, and the Special Forces. But we can ignore the last one for now. It’s Mimic we need to watch out for. While you were sleeping, six shops on Mafia turf were blown up...all at the same time. The casualties are increasing by the minute.”

Along with smuggling and trading stolen goods, the Mafia protected shops and companies in exchange for compensation. If those businesses were attacked, then the Mafia instantly lost its supporters’ trust along with some of its economic infrastructure. I suddenly thought of Pops at the restaurant. That place was one of the few I managed.

“But the smaller stores are being saved for later, it seems.”

Dazai must have read my mind.

“Mimic is like nothing we’ve faced so far. They’re terribly quick, their attacks are devastating, and they show up without even making a sound. Even if we wanted to attack their headquarters, they appear out of nowhere and disappear into thin air. There’s no way to take

them by surprise. It's *as if we're fighting against ghosts*—against real *grau geists*."

I thought back to the sniper and the abandoned building where Ango had been held captive. There really was something ghostlike about their existence.

A ghost squad—departed souls that wished to devour even the corrupt Mafia's spirit.

"We still can't determine a definite pattern of attack, but what we do know is that they're serious about leveling the Mafia's turf. Not even the tormented souls of hell would do something so mad. Akutagawa and other militant factions have formed ranks and are fighting back, but...we still don't even know the enemy leader's skill. We're at a disadvantage."

"That skill user Akutagawa was one of your subordinates, right?" I said, tracing my memory. "I heard he had a rather aggressive skill... but even he's no match for them?"

"Akutagawa—he's like a sword without a sheath." Dazai grinned from ear to ear. "He'll surely become the Mafia's strongest skill user in the not-so-distant future, but for now he needs someone who can teach him how to put that sword away."

I was surprised. I had never heard Dazai openly speak so highly of one of his men like that before.

"Is he really that talented?"

"When I first saw him over in the slums, I was horrified. His talents are extraordinary, and his skill is extremely destructive. Plus, he's stubborn. If I'd left him to his own devices, he would've ended up a slave to his own powers until he destroyed himself."

Dazai didn't freely make people work under him, period; much less a boy on the verge of starvation in the slums. But Dazai seemed to have his own reasons for doing it.

"At any rate, back on topic, Mimic is who we currently have to watch out for. There's been a call for a meeting among the five executives where we'll discuss how to take them on using everything we've got. We're on high alert."

This presidium was an extremely powerful legislative conference that would decide the future course of the entire Mafia. As far as I could remember, the last time they had one was during the Dragon's Head Conflict. I was once again face-to-face with just how much of a threat Mimic was.

"I still don't know what those Special Forces are after," Dazai continued. "But after seeing what they did to you, it looks like they won't be baring their fangs and attacking us anytime soon. It's Mimic that's the real threat. Just a little while ago, my men, including Akutagawa, were ambushed. It was like a beast devouring a venomous

snake. The battle took place on the main road in front of the art museum—”

I got out of the bed as I listened. My fingers were still slightly numb, but not enough to bother me during battle.

“Odasaku, don’t tell me you plan on going,” he said as if reprimanding me.

“The Mafia’s striking back with everything we’ve got, right?” I replied, sliding my arms through the sleeves of my overcoat that was hanging on the wall.

“I thought you had no interest in fighting,” Dazai replied with a smile.

“I don’t,” I insisted as I equipped my gun harness. “But sometimes small things pick at my heart...like the two people I owe a debt to.”

After finishing getting ready, I walked across the room. Dazai watched me in silence. As I reached the door, he tossed me something that jingled when I caught it. I opened my hand to find a car key. Then Dazai added, “Don’t worry about any debts. Nobody ever even remembers doing favors.”

“I’m not good at forgetting,” I turned around and replied. “Dazai, you’ve already helped me several times with this case. Your men are under attack, right? They need your help.”

“Y’know, it really hurts me that you consider something as small as this a debt.” He gave a feeble smirk. “So who’s the other guy you owe?”

I didn’t answer him; I just opened the door and left. Dazai saw me off without pushing any further. Despite not even exchanging a word, we were thinking the same thing.



Two forces were engaged in a shoot-out in front of the chalky-white shrine: the Mimic soldiers in tattered gray clothes and the Mafia members in black suits and sunglasses. Both were firing the same foreign automatic rifles. Bullets flew across the town square, chipping away at the shrine’s pale-colored pillars like an ice sculpture.

They were battling on the art museum’s front yard. The rectangular building with its alabaster facade rose high into the sky. Square cobble paving stretched endlessly across the yard, evoking a digital, pixelated kind of feel. White columns spaced closely together acted as shields for the gunfire as they came crumbling down one after another.

There were four Mafia members and nine Mimic. Mimic was dominating in quality, quantity, and experience as they backed the Mafia into a corner.

They split up into two groups to pour cross fire through a pincer movement. One of the Mafia men yelled orders while returning fire as they retreated into the art museum. The Mimic soldiers, on the other hand, did not say a word. They simply advanced, chasing their prey in silence. As the first Mimic soldier stepped into the building, something caught his eye, and he quickly looked up.

That, however, ended up being the last move he ever made.

“Do you not enjoy art?”

The soldier’s head flew to one side, then bounced off the wall before rolling back to its owner’s feet. It took a moment before fresh blood spurted out from the clean cut severing the soldier’s neck. A dark shadow drifted down to the ground, its black overcoat elegantly billowing in the breeze. Realizing something was wrong, the following Mimic soldier drew his gun.

“How boorish. The artwork here is the manifestation of the human spirit. Show some respect.”

The shadowy figure twisted his body, gently pivoting his black overcoat. It split into three parts, each transforming into a massless blade before launching forward.

First, the rifle was split in two. Its contents then spilled out, showing a perfectly smooth slice all the way through.

Next, the fingers holding the rifle noiselessly dropped to the ground one by one. Finally, the Mimic soldier’s torso slowly slid forward as his lower half leaned backward before they hit the ground.

The remaining soldiers, who had fortunately been out of range of the dark blades’ slaughter, simultaneously aimed their muzzles at the black overcoat and pulled the trigger.

“Guns are the instruments of fools.”

The shadowy figure in a black overcoat, Ryuunosuke Akutagawa, took another step forward. A split second later, the twelve bullets clashed with what appeared to be silent blades of solidified darkness. Most of the bullets were reflected before even reaching Akutagawa, while the remaining ones crashed into an invisible wall, stopping mere inches away from him. Akutagawa cut through space, creating a shield. He twisted his body, and the murderous shadowy blades sprung forward as if to answer his calls.

One man’s face; another, his body; even one soldier’s legs were all sliced in half. Still, the blades’ wild dance had not ended. They soared through the air like a violent tempest of darkness destroying everything in its path, as if they were living creatures with minds of their own. It was a skill specialized only in destruction and killing—nothing more.

Akutagawa laughed.

It was as if a pitch-black demon were devouring the gray ghosts.

“Retraite!”

The surviving Mimic soldiers’ faces turned sickly pale as they quickly backed away.

“Come back! Fight me!” Akutagawa screamed while chasing after them. Black spears and bullets clashed violently across the battlefield.

“This is nothing! This barely even counts as a trial! Show me cruelty—show me the sort of brutality that will freeze my very soul!” the boy dressed in black screamed, an echo of supplication in his voice.

Just then, a Mimic personnel carrier appeared before the art museum containing new soldiers. Like a mad dog, a fiendish smirk played across Akutagawa’s lips.

That was when a signal flare shot into the air from the personnel carrier. The phosphorescence raced straight up, leaving a red trail in the sky and casting a shadow over the earth below.

Immediately, the Mimic soldiers ceased fire.

“What—?”

Bewildered, Akutagawa surveyed the battlefield. Not a single enemy was holding up their gun. One after another, they placed their weapons on the ground. Some even had both hands already in the air.

“They’re surrendering?” Akutagawa muttered in disbelief. “Impossible.”

With his arms raised, one soldier walked over from the other side of the group. He had handsome features, and both his clothes and hair were a sickly silver-gray hue, as if his soul had been sucked out. The man looked essentially the same as the other Mimic soldiers but was disproportionately taller than the rest. And yet, his footsteps didn’t make a sound; it was as if he were weightless. Decorating the breast of his military fatigues were various medals of honor in all different colors. The soldier’s emotionless eyes locked on Akutagawa. Confused and at a loss, the Mafia members pointed their guns at the defenseless man as he approached.

“So it’s you... You’re the black-robed skill user they say is immune to bullets,” the tall man said, his lips barely moving. His voice seemed to come from nowhere in particular, like a howling wind.

“Who are you?”

“The commander... Mimic’s leader.”

The moment his words sunk in, the Mafia combatants rushed over in unison before pointing their guns at him. The Mimic leader’s eyes did not even waver.

“Their leader himself has come to surrender? An admirable attitude, but hardly believable... In fact, it disgusts me.”

Akutagawa’s overcoat transformed into several black belts that bound the Mimic leader’s hands and feet together before dragging the

man to his knees.

“State your name, leader of Mimic.”

“Gide. André Gide. I came to ask you for...a match.”

The leader's tone was calm; he didn't appear to be shaken in the least.

“The Mimic leader himself wishes to fight me? What an honor that would be if I actually believed you. Answering questions you haven't been asked only makes you less convincing.” Akutagawa shot the man a piercing glare as he spoke. “Leader of Mimic, do you know why I haven't cut your head off yet?”

“Maybe because...you were disciplined not to?”

Akutagawa punched Gide in the face. With both legs tied together, he was unable to dodge, and a drop of blood spilled from the corner of his mouth.

“The reason I haven't cut your head off yet is that I heard Mimic's leader was a skill user.”

Akutagawa swiped the old-fashioned gun from Gide's waist, then pointed it at him.

“I can't gain *his* acceptance no matter how many pea-shooting weaklings I kill. Show me your skill. If it is the real thing, I will give you that match you so desire.”

Gide just stared at Akutagawa and the gun.

“So this is your skill... You can control the black overcoat,” he groaned, staring at the black straps around his arms and legs. “An extraordinary ability, one with no openings. However...it's lacking. It's not enough to free our souls from original sin... It appears I expected a little too much from you.”

Akutagawa's face stiffened as hard as a diamond. His breathing halted, and something in his body snapped. He responded with the flash of his black blade, slashing toward a man who was tied up and unable to move. Without even a hint of nervousness, Gide leaned forward and tilted his head. The blade grazed the side of his face, cutting a few hairs to flutter in the wind. As Gide turned his neck, the tip of his head skimmed the old-fashioned gun Akutagawa had just stolen. As the pistol left Akutagawa's hand, his finger accidentally pulled the trigger.

One of the belts around Gide reacted by enveloping the bullet and stopping it before it could reach Akutagawa. However, this freed Gide's left hand...and he was carrying another pistol in his military uniform. He drew the gun with that hand and shot the mafioso next to him before the target even knew what was going on. The bullet struck him in the shoulder, causing the Mafia member's automatic rifle to fire three bullets, with one shooting right through Akutagawa's arm. The other two hit two mafiosi in the chest. The shots were fatal.

“What—?!”

Taken aback at being shot in the arm, Akutagawa reflexively used his skill to block. He cut through space, blocking Gide’s next shot, but in return he ended up undoing the black straps restraining Gide, thus freeing him.

Immediately, Gide picked up his other gun lying on the ground... and that was when the one-sided massacre began.

It wasn’t some sort of mysterious, visible power at work. The bullets weren’t turning and flying in the opposite direction, nor was lightning or fire falling from the skies. No one was suddenly being frozen in place, either. It was simply a repeat of the earlier gunfight with the exception that everything was taking place at extremely close range—that, and the outcome was different.

Gide rolled over the ground while shooting the pistols in both hands. Each bullet pierced straight and true into a Mafia member’s vital organ. Only Akutagawa was able to defend—or rather, he was *forced to defend* would be a more accurate description.

“What’s going on? Is this...a skill?” Akutagawa uttered.

Gunfire illuminated Gide’s surroundings as he evaded every counterattack, be it bullets or Akutagawa’s black claws. With the slightest of movements, Gide dodged Akutagawa as if he were a mere insect. Before long, one of Gide’s bullets eventually sneaked past Akutagawa’s guard and hit him in the abdomen with enough force that it bent him backward. Coughing up blood, Akutagawa fell back and immediately wrapped his black fabric around the wounds on his arm and stomach to act as makeshift tourniquets. However, the result gave him less fabric to use to attack and defend, which put him at an even bigger disadvantage.

“Impossible... A destructive skill that surpasses mine?”

“I’m jealous, Mafia skill user... I might have asked the same thing.” Gide stood with both pistols drawn. “If you were a little more capable—if you had more experience, then perhaps things would have been different. But right now, you’re nothing more than a little black duckling.”

“Don’t you dare talk down to me!”

Akutagawa’s hair stood on end. His black coat whirled as it started to form spikes, but Gide shot them down right as they were about to launch at the speed of sound.

“You...can read my movements...?!?”

“We are Mimic.” Gide aimed his gun at Akutagawa. “We are a squad of ghosts—a *fantôme escouade* forsaken by God and fallen from grace. We shall continue to march through tainted blood until our true enemy brings us salvation.”

Akutagawa was briefly overwhelmed by Gide’s presence...because

he knew Gide was neither acting nor bluffing, but speaking only the truth. He could see it in his eyes.

“...Answer me, leader of Mimic,” Akutagawa said in a quiet voice with a gun to his face. “What are you trying to accomplish by attacking the Mafia’s territory?”

“Nothing,” Gide replied without missing a beat. “Ghosts wish for nothing. All we want is for our souls to cease to exist. Long ago, we turned to the Order of the Clock Tower for that purpose. Now we are here to demand that from you... Any last words, black-robed skill user?”

“Kill me.” Akutagawa closed his eyes, then gave a small smirk. “I —understand your feelings, truly I do. I regret that I couldn’t become the *enemy* you sought.”

“Farewell.”

Gide pulled the trigger.

But he didn’t fire. Right before he was about to shoot, he reflexively took evasive action. Raising his pistols up, he turned his body to dodge something...but his efforts were in vain. *Odasaku’s bullet hit the pistol out of Gide’s hand.*

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My bullet struck the enemy’s pistol, knocking it to the ground. The man who I assumed was the Mimic leader seemed to be taken aback. Maybe he was surprised I’d shot his weapon with such accuracy from so far away, although he looked startled by something else, as well. There was something curious about how he’d tried to dodge before I even fired my weapon.

That wasn’t the time to think about it, though. I rushed toward the enemy as I shot. He fired back, but I could already “see” the bullet’s trail. Turning my head, I evaded the incoming bullet. I then fired back, but he dodged in the same way.

He dodged?

“Mafia reinforcements...?!”

Neither of our bullets were connecting as we drew closer until I was near enough to grab his gun. And I did make a swipe for it, but the Mimic leader nimbly twisted his wrist, thus avoiding my hand. It was the same bizarre reaction from a second ago. He could read my every move.

I promptly gave up on trying to neutralize the enemy and searched for any Mafia members that were still alive. Most of them had already perished, but there was a boy in a black overcoat who was still conscious. Ryuunosuke Akutagawa, I believe his name was.

“We’re getting out of here.”

“What do you think you’re doing?!”

He resisted, but I hoisted him up on my shoulder and made a dash for an exit route. Akutagawa was as light as a tree branch. Someone that thin would bleed out and turn into a mummy in no time. In an instant, I was welcomed by the concentrated fire of the Mimic soldiers’ automatic rifles. Having already seen the attack in a vision, I dived to the side, still holding Akutagawa, and avoided the line of fire. Akutagawa groaned in pain as his wound opened, but I was in no position to comfort him at that moment. I ran away as quickly as I could while firing warning shots at the enemy. Then, right as they took cover, I broke for the man-made forest.

While I heard orders being yelled behind me to pursue, I sprinted through the artificial forest of sparsely planted larches. The trees here should give me a little protection from their attacks, but there was no guarantee this wouldn’t lead us to a dead end.

“Sorry, but I’m gonna have to put you down. Can you run?”

I lowered Akutagawa to the ground. He knelt onto some thick underbrush as fresh blood dripped out of the wound on his stomach.

“I’m Sakunosuke Oda, a friend of Dazai’s. I came to help you escape from this hell.”

I extended a hand, but he simply clutched his abdomen without moving. While his skill was powerful in both offense and defense, I heard he was rather frail physically.



Out of nowhere, I had a vision. After it was over, I lunged backward in response to what I had seen. Then, like a flash of darkness, a blade swung right through where my head just was.

"I've heard about you. You're nothing more than a lackey," Akutagawa said, panting. His eyes glowed with outrage as if he was going to pounce at me any second.

"Yep."

"You're 'Dazai's friend'?"

His penetrating gaze shot right through me. It was as if something had set his heart ablaze with utter darkness.

"Yeah," I replied.

"Dazai told me something once. He said I could train a hundred years and still wouldn't be able to defeat you." Akutagawa's murderous rage swelled and burst forth. "He wouldn't lie, which is exactly why I can't forgive you. I'm inferior to even you, the lowest-ranking member of the Mafia? Why? Why? Why?"

Three strips of black fabric soared toward me. Having already seen his attack in a vision, I rolled to the side and dodged. The tree behind me was sliced in two before falling down with a loud crack.

"We don't have time to fight between ourselves. The enemy will be here any moment now."

"Why?! Why did Dazai...?!"

I lowered my head until it was almost touching the ground. After cutting down a few trees, the black fabric behind me swung back right over my head. Immediately, a few more trees collapsed.

What a frightening skill. It had extraordinary range and speed. What was more, the blades sliced through everything they touched, making it one of the most powerful skills in the Mafia. The idea of someone this talented at this age was spine-chilling. I could see why Dazai wanted to keep him by his side to train him. However, now wasn't the time for admiration.

As I shot my pistol at Akutagawa, he sliced the space before him with the black fabric he had apparently been storing by his side. The bullet then sank into the cut space and stopped. However, I already knew about his defense mechanism, so I used that opening to slide to his side and kicked his injured arm with everything I had.

"Gah...?!"

The excruciating pain forced Akutagawa to writhe and fall unconscious. He was already mentally drained from using his skill over and over again and from guarding multiple times with a technique he wasn't yet accustomed to using. The kick to the gunshot wound was enough to send him over the edge.

He was barely conscious regardless.

I'd heard that Dazai's Spartan training style was relentless, but no matter how effective it was in producing fast results, Akutagawa was still a kid. Mentally, he was already exhausted from battling the Mimic soldiers, its leader, and me all in quick succession. No one would've been surprised if he'd passed out on his own. Just where did that tenacity come from?

"Why?! Why did Dazai...?!"

When he'd let out that anguished cry, I caught a glimpse of something faint—something other than anger—hidden behind his expression. I couldn't get it out of my head.

"I had a feeling...that I would find someone in this country with that skill."

"What are you talking about?"

I turned around.

The Mimic leader stood at the forest's entrance with three of his men. Since I could no longer hear any gunfire, you could've even described the man-made forest as tranquil in that moment.

"I am André Gide. We ghosts came in search of...the one who will free our souls," the leader claimed.

He had striking features. If he were wearing a fancy suit with a glass of wine in hand, I could see him being an actor in a movie. However, there was a certain quality to the timbre of his voice that sounded like something from decades past.

"Well, I know this guy who works at a funeral home. I'm sure he'll give you a discount if I put in a word for you."

"That won't be necessary...because I just found who I was looking for."

At the same instant, Gide shot his pistol, aiming for right between my eyes. It was an extremely accurate shot, but knowing it was coming five seconds in advance made it easy to dodge.

I took half a step to my right. One bullet hit me between the eyes, the other through my heart. The assault weapon's soft-point bullet broke through my cranium and into the back of my skull, sending me flying from the impact.

The vision ended there.

My skill showed me the future. While suppressing the panic flashing through my mind, I swerved to the left, contrary to what I did in my vision. However, the moment I dodged, a bullet was buried in my skull. The inside of my head shook from the impact, sending a soft, damp sound through my skull.

The vision ended there.

I stood in a daze. Gide hadn't moved since he got there. He was still aiming his gun right at me and *hadn't even pulled the trigger yet*. I was suddenly thrown into a deep pool of confusion.

What's going on?

"Your confusion is my confusion as well," Gide said after lowering the gun. "Because you can do exactly what I can. You have the skill to see danger that involves you seconds before it happens. I saw a future where you moved right, so I adjusted my aim accordingly. However, you 'saw' that future and swerved left instead. And I saw that future as well... Do you understand what I'm saying?"

We have the same skill?

"Your ability to observe the future is omnipotent. No one in this world can kill you...with the exception of me." Gide's cheeks tensed as his lips vaguely stretched to the sides. It looked as if he was smiling. "And the only one who can bury me is you. You are the sole person who can end this war."

His smile was truly from the heart. It was as if someone had injected ice-cold poison into my veins. I almost reflexively pointed my gun at him.

"Yes. Just like that," Gide replied as if he were begging for it. "That bullet alone can stop this war. You're a member of the Mafia. You should want nothing more than the head of your enemy."

The muzzle of my gun was pointed at Gide. Everything he said was true. There was no telling who would win in a match between two people who could see the future. But there wasn't anyone else in the Mafia who could even make him sweat.

I took in a deep breath before exhaling with the muzzle still aimed right at the enemy. Then I lowered my gun.

"I'll pass," I replied. "I came here to save my ally. And honestly, I haven't killed anyone in years."

".....What?" That was the first time I heard a note of surprise in his voice. "Are you...not with the Mafia?"

"The Mafia's full of all different kinds of people."

"Guns are tools to kill, and this is a battlefield." Gide gradually raised his voice. "So let us fight! Let us fight with all that we are—a battle that tears away at our souls! All a war needs is a single bullet. Even if you don't shoot, you will have no choice but to fight back if I do!"

He aimed his gun at me. Only moments prior, I "saw" him fire.

"Everyone's obsessed with fighting. They can't get enough of it," I said. "But not me. I'm interested in living. What interests me is how you guys live and what drives you to war. And if you die, that information will be forever lost."

"There is no life more important than death!"

Gide pulled the trigger.

I had a vision.

The bullet hit me as I bent backward to dodge. I ducked, yet I was

still hit. I tried swerving to the side, but the bullet connected. Each condition was superimposed as it played out through my head.

Foreseeing the future wouldn't help me in the least like this. I plunged forward in an attempt to decrease my area of damage. The enemies' bullets soared by, slightly grazing my temples. The Mimic soldiers shot their automatic rifles in tune with their leader; however, I was able to easily foresee it. Rolling over the dirt, I avoided their bullet shower, then fired back with both of my weapons. They were mere warning shots, purposely aimed to not hit anyone. After rolling to Akutagawa's side, I got on one knee and raised my guns.

"You purposely...missed?" Gide's expression darkened. "Do you... really believe this is the battle we have yearned for? What, what is it we've been fighting for until now...?"

"Sorry you came all the way to Japan for this, but I have my reasons for not killing anyone. Please find someone else."

"Why?!" Gide yelled. "After that battle, we searched for a place worthy of death. We wandered the world like specters! You are our only hope! Shoot! Shoot us! If you don't..."

His howls floated unheeded into the atmosphere. He sounded like a man deep in his grave, but also like someone who desperately wanted to live. It appeared I had no choice but to answer him. In hushed tones, I replied:

"The reason why I can't grant your wish is that I have a dream. When I quit the Mafia and am able to do anything I want, I will sit at a desk in a room with a view of the ocean..."

—*"Then you write what happens next."*

—*"That's the only way to preserve its perfection."*

"I want to be a novelist," I continued. "I want to throw away my gun. All I want in my hands are a pen and paper... A certain man once told me that writing novels is writing people... You cannot write about someone's life after you rob them of it. That's why I will never kill again."

All noises vanished in an instant. The sound of the wind, the sound of leaves rubbing together—they all disappeared, filling the world with only silence.

That was something I had never told anyone before, not even Dazai or Ango.

"Is that your answer?" Gide asked in a low voice. "Is that the reason why you refuse to stand on the battlefield before us?"

"Yes," I answered.

I looked at Gide, and he looked back at me. Our gazes quietly crossed as we tried to read the emotions hidden deep in each other's eyes. That was when I realized the negotiation had failed. Gide aimed his gun at Akutagawa, who was still unconscious, and pulled the trigger.

It would've been impossible to pick up an unconscious body and dodge a bullet at the same time, so I threw myself in front of Akutagawa. The impact hit me right in the middle of the chest. I'd jumped to the side, and the force spun me around before I collapsed onto the ground and rolled back even farther.

"To live? We are already dead. We are but soulless masses of flesh controlled by the spirits of the departed. We are nothing more than empty shells waiting for a skill user like you to reduce these bodies to ash with your gunfire."

Each cough brought an unbearable pain in my chest. I ripped my jacket and checked the bullet to find it stuck in my bulletproof vest. Even then, my sternum ached as if I'd been hit with a hammer.

"You're not dead." I slowly strung my words together. "I don't know what happened to you in the past, but you can take your time to think about how you'll die."

"Why don't you understand...? You're the only one who can...!"

As he wrung every last bit of anger out of his voice, all emotion suddenly faded from Gide's eyes like a candle going out. And just like that, his gray eyes were empty, as if I were staring into endless ruins.

"If that is your answer, then there is nothing that can be done. You will not kill me because you do not understand my desire. Also, I will not kill you because you are the only one who can guide us into the battlefield's sacred fire."

Without making a sound, the personnel carrier from earlier stopped alongside the artificial forest's entrance behind Gide. Then he and his men quietly got into the truck to the very last man. The grave tone reminded me of a funeral. As they were about to take off, Gide looked back at me once more, then said, "I will make you understand."

His expression was pale. There was a note of sorrow in his voice that sounded like something not of this world. I couldn't even tell where it was coming from.

"I will make you understand me. I'll show you...," Gide said while sternly pointing at his temple, "...what is in here. Then you will know the truth. You will understand that *one of us must die.*"

He silently walked away, got in the truck, and disappeared. However, at the final moment before he left, he cast a glance at me that chilled my blood. At last, he spoke.

"Look forward to it."

Ever since that day, Mimic stopped attacking us. After getting the injured the help they needed, I talked with Dazai a little. Then I locked myself in my room and cycled through my thoughts. In that dim room, I listened only to my heartbeat as I observed the emotions bubbling up from within me like foam. I had a feeling something was going to happen, and soon. Something big. Like the violet sky before nightfall, like faraway thunder before a downpour, I had a faint sense I was about to face something colossal. This foreboding had nothing to do with being a skill user; it was the small tinge everyone gets before something's about to happen. But realistically, there was virtually nothing I could do about it until it actually occurred and slapped me in the face. The world isn't kind. You have to be tough.

Night fell. Dazai contacted me and asked if I could meet him to discuss our plans going forward. I grabbed my coat and left my room.

"I like the night," Dazai said. "Nighttime is the Mafia's time."

The two of us took a walk through downtown Yokohama. The city residents were calmly roaming the streets. Buildings old and new equally bathed in the moist sea breeze. The golden stars in the sky flickered just like the lights on the earth's surface.

"Where are we going now?"

"To meet someone." Dazai smiled. "Anyway, I feel for you, Odasaku. Not only did you run into the enemy's boss, but he made some serious advances toward you, too. At this rate, you guys will be married by the weekend."

"That's not what happened." At least, I hoped not. "They're just a group of weirdos who start wars for the sake of it."

"Oh? I think it's kinda cute, going to such lengths to plan another person's death. I never would've thought of doing that." There was more than a hint of amusement in his tone. "But I can't ignore what he said to you before he left. They might try to switch up their strategy before attacking again. I need to have my men keep an eye on you."

"How much longer is this conflict gonna last?"

"The Mimic soldiers don't bother me so much, but the leader's skill is a real pain. Surprise attacks won't work, which means we need some inside information. Got any ideas?"

The Mafia was making every effort to get intel on Mimic, but so far it had been all for naught.

"Ango's the only lead I've got," I said. "He was working as a double agent for the Mafia and Mimic for years. He ought to know a lot more than what he told me the other day."

"I agree." Dazai nodded.

"Is there no way to find him?"

"*There is*," he plainly declared.

"Oh, there is?" I nodded. Then I found myself surprised. "Wait. There is?"

"More precisely, there's no need to search for him. He'll be waiting for us. All right, we're here."

I looked up in the direction Dazai was pointing in.

"Here?" I asked.

"Where else?" Dazai wryly smirked.

Before me was a familiar bar with a white sign and a small light glowing in the darkness of the night.



Dazai and I went down the dimly lit stairs to the basement. I could hear the faint voices of people conversing as my feet were enveloped in a white cloud of cigarette smoke. Thinking back, there was always someone there. Whenever I came by, I would always mysteriously run into a friend who would immediately greet me, even if we hadn't made plans to meet or if I'd just stopped by on a whim.

And that still hadn't changed.

"Hey, nice to see you. I've already started."

In the exact same seat, ever his usual self, Ango raised his glass and greeted us. After giving the bartender the signal with my eyes, I raised a finger. Immediately, he gave me a quick glance of acknowledgment. Dazai and I then took the seats by Ango's side.

"You could've at least tried to get in touch with me," I said.

"It took me a while to throw the pursuers off my trail." Ango let out a bitter laugh. "I've had a lot of difficulties that prevented me from talking. But now there are no wiretaps, and nobody followed me here. I can drink to my heart's content. More importantly, how did you know I was here?"

"I found a handkerchief at the site of the explosion." Dazai grinned fiendishly. "There was a napkin from this place wrapped inside. It was completely obvious. Who would've thought spies used such dated methods, huh?"

Now that he mentioned it, I remembered lending Ango my handkerchief before I passed out. That must've been when he slipped the napkin in. I just thought I'd lost it.

"We're the only ones who would pick up on something like that," Ango said before letting out a small sigh. "I thought I'd never get to drink here again. I'm lucky. And I want to share this luck with my two friends."

"Well, aren't you being rather sentimental for an *undercover*

agent,” Dazai coolly replied.

I looked at Ango. He didn’t immediately react to what Dazai had said, but his lips seemed to faintly curl.

“...I’m impressed,” Ango quietly admitted after a few moments went by.

“Ango, you were already somebody before you joined the Mafia. You were *an agent for the Home Affairs Ministry’s Special Division for Unusual Powers*, a secret government agency. Your mission was to keep an eye on the Mafia and report back to headquarters.”

“.....Yes,” Ango replied after a deep sigh.

“While you may be part of a secret organization that presides over the skill users in this country, you wouldn’t make it out unscathed if you took on the Port Mafia head-on. Plus, the mission of the Special Division for Unusual Powers is to *manage* skill users, not wipe them out. That’s why they sent an agent to infiltrate the Mafia to keep an eye on things. It was an unavoidable measure of action. Am I right?”

That would mean the entire mess that got Ango into the Mafia was set up by the Special Division for Unusual Powers.

“That’s when Mimic came up. This criminal organization of skill users planned on coming to Japan, and they would prove to be another headache for the Special Division for Unusual Powers to deal with. Therefore, they got you to keep an eye on them...as a double agent for the Mafia. Of course, those black-clothed Special Forces—the Division’s task force—would come to your rescue if needed.”

“Being a government official was a thankless job for little money,” Ango claimed with a scowl.

“So that would mean Ango wasn’t a double agent, but a *triple agent*,” I said.

“Yep.” Dazai nodded. “Well, that’s about the extent of my research. Anyway, enough boring stuff. Let’s drink.”

Glasses were then gently placed before our seats. Usually, we would say cheers after that, but not this time. Perhaps that would never happen again.



Nobody spoke for a while after that. A bitter silence, more bitter than anything on the menu, filled the air between us.

“So...” Ango reluctantly spoke up since no one else would say anything. “Did you come here to affirm our abiding friendship?”

“As if.” Only the corners of Dazai’s lips curled. “We came to get information on Mimic. You knew that.”

“It’s strange. This is the same liquor I always order, yet it has no taste,” Ango muttered while staring at his glass as if he was talking to

himself. Then he turned his gaze to me and asked, “The Division’s surveillance group informed us that you met Gide. Did you see his skill?”

I told him I saw that Gide could predict his enemy’s attacks.

“Even the Special Division for Unusual Powers has no way of dealing with that skill.” Ango shook his head. “The only option would be to drop a massive bomb on him...but he’s elusive. We can’t pin him down. The higher-ups apparently intend to let the Mafia deal with this case. After both crime syndicates take each other out, the Special Division for Unusual Powers can just manage whichever group survives, thus never having to sacrifice one of their own.”

Such a brilliant maneuver would be like killing two birds with one stone for the Special Division for Unusual Powers.

“How convenient.” Dazai tilted his head to the side. “But even the Mafia would have a hard time dealing with that skill.” Dazai then looked at me out of the corner of his eye. “...With the exception of one lowest-ranked mafioso, of course.”

“He’s a military veteran in command of countless powerful soldiers,” I mentioned as I stared at my reflection in my drink. “Besides, our skills merely allow us to *see a few seconds into the future*. Who wins depends on whoever’s more skilled in battle and with a gun.”

Being more skilled with a gun means being able to shoot your opponent from farther away with more accuracy.

“Odasaku’s marksmanship...” Dazai broke into a meaningful grin. “There’s a lot of uncertainty. Plus, there’s also the problem of a *skill singularity*.”

“Skill singularity?”

“Did anything unusual happen when you used your skill against Gide?”

After thinking about it for a moment, I told him something unusual did, in fact, happen. I saw multiple futures stacked on top of one another.

“It’s a phenomenon the government has started to research only recently.” Ango’s expression was stern as he spoke. “They’ve observed that when multiple skills interact, on rare occasions they’ll careen off into a completely unexpected direction. The details are unclear, but for example...let’s imagine two people are fighting, but both have the skill to *always strike first*... Or one has the skill to *always deceive their opponent* while the other has the skill to *always see the truth*... What would happen? The answer is *we don’t know until we try*. Most of the time, one skill ends up winning. However, in some rare cases, it leads to a phenomenon that isn’t initiated by either party. The Special Division for Unusual Powers calls this a *singularity*.”

Maybe what I saw then was a singularity. Or was a singularity something even beyond that?

"I really wasn't supposed to tell you any of that," Ango mentioned. "Even the fact that we met here would be a huge problem if the higher-ups in the Home Affairs Ministry ever find out. I'll need to go into hiding for the time being."

Dazai looked at Ango, then beamed as he said, "Oh my. It almost sounds like you think you'll be able to leave here alive, Ango."

The air froze. Ango's expression slowly faded away, but Dazai was still smiling.

"I mean, you know what I'm saying, right? An elusive, secret agency of skill users shrouded in darkness—a group of mythical status that sends shivers down the spines of all criminal syndicates in the country—and one of the members from that organization is here right before my eyes. The amount of information I want out of you could create a tome thicker than the dictionary itself. Am I wrong?"

I naturally asked Dazai what was on my mind. "Do you plan on turning this place into a war zone?"

Ango didn't even flinch. His face was frozen into an ambiguous smirk. He stared at Dazai as if his eyes were locked in place.

"It's my fault," Ango said as if he had given up. "I made a mistake. I assumed that this place was the one place we could meet that transcended status or rank. I wouldn't want to cause any trouble here, so do to me as you will. I won't resist."

Ango ought to have known just how horrifying Mafia torture was. There was no hope for him to return to the Special Division for Unusual Powers alive. Even if I took Ango's side there, nothing would change. There was no way to break out of Dazai's trap around the bar's perimeter, and the orphans at the restaurant would be killed if I betrayed the Mafia.

"Ango." Dazai quietly spoke up, turning his hand back and forth as if to inspect both sides. "If I make just one phone call, my men will immediately surround the place. But they still haven't made a move. Get out of here before I change my mind."

Ango tried to say something, but he swallowed his words.

"I'm not sad. I knew from the very beginning," Dazai said. His face was a blank mask now. "It didn't matter whether you were with the Special Division for Unusual Powers. I always lose the things I don't want to lose the most. That's why I don't feel anything anymore. The moment you get your hands on something worth going after, you lose it. That's just how things are. There is nothing worth pursuing at the cost of prolonging a life of suffering."

I stared at Dazai. We had known each other for a while, but this was the first time he'd ever opened up about himself. I could see a

thorn the size of a harpoon wedged deeply into his life.

“Dazai, Odasaku, I am no different. As part of an underground organization whose duties must be kept secret, as a skill user who hunts other skill users, I have been engulfed in the darkness of the government for too long. I shall never walk in the light again.” Ango looked at us and continued, “If there ever comes a time when the Division and the Mafia no longer exist...if we’re ever freed from the confines of our work...do you think we can drink here again like this?”

“Don’t say any more, Ango,” a voice said nearby. It was my voice. “Just don’t.”

Ango shook his head, seemingly hurt. Then he gradually stood from his stool and slowly left the bar, his eyes downcast as if he was listening carefully to the sound of his own footsteps. I figured that was probably the last time I would ever see him. I looked to the seat he had been in to find something placed on the table next to his empty glass. After picking it up, I showed Dazai.

It was the photo we’d taken in that very bar only a few days ago. All three of us were laughing and smiling.

CHAPTER IV

People's feelings reflect the weather, but the weather doesn't reciprocate. The bright, warm sun shone down on Yokohama that day as I walked through the city with a frown. I was sure I looked even grumpier than usual, since I was carrying stuff in both hands. I wasn't actually in a bad mood, though. It was merely a problem of balance because my hands were full with bags of toys and sweets. You'd need a little training to carry these with a smile.

They were for the kids. I'd picked up some presents for them, since I was sure they were getting sick of the refugee life. In fact, they were probably bored to tears hiding in the safe house Dazai prepared for them, so I was a little worried this wouldn't be enough of a bribe to bring smiles to their faces. After all, what's enough for adults is never enough for kids.

A young man riding a bicycle passed by while whistling. Young children ran ahead of their mother in pursuit of some great quarry that only they could see. I couldn't help but feel as though the war between two crime syndicates was taking place on the opposite side of the world.

I thought about Mimic while I walked. I thought about the lonely soldiers who lived to die. Gide said he'd make me understand. Those words were a curse to drag me into battle. But at the same time, they were the heartfelt screams of a young child. The only ones who could understand him were his men or his enemy—and it looked as if he wanted me to become the latter.

I didn't know whether killing each other was the right thing. At this rate, the war was going to continue until either the Mafia or Mimic was destroyed. Was there no way to end this peacefully somehow? Was there no way I could both understand them and still draw my modest boundary lines?

I also had to think about the kids. I planned on quitting the Mafia once they became independent enough to live on their own without my help. I didn't know when that would be, but I knew it would come one day. The kids would grow into adults. Some might work at an office, some might become engineers, and others might even become professional baseball players. The oldest apparently dreamed of being in the Mafia like me, which was headache inducing, but, well, I

figured I'd be able to talk him out of it. Once that all happened, I could finally toss my gun aside, sit at a desk somewhere I could see the ocean, and start writing my novel.

When I arrived in front of the building, I paused for a moment. The place Dazai found for the kids to stay in was an import license office affiliated with the Mafia. It was a two-story blue building by the ocean that had been baptized with rust from top to bottom by the sea breeze. To the side of the building was a spacious shared parking lot occupied by a moss-colored bus with nothing better to do.

From what I was told, Dazai rented out the entire building, so the employees there had been sent to a completely different office. He always went to extremes, but this measure was also proof that Dazai believed there was a high chance of the kids being targeted. With my hands full, I headed up the stairs while going over in my mind the list of who'd get which toy. After walking down the hallway, I opened the door to the meeting room the kids were supposedly using.

Nobody was inside. The desk had been overturned, there were holes in the wall, and the floor was scuffed, apparently from having something heavy dragged across it. The scattered crayons on the floor were crushed under large footprints. I heard a heavy thud as something hit the floor, then realized I had dropped the bags I was carrying. I began to run almost unconsciously. Rushing out of the meeting room, I descended the staircase in practically a single leap.

Once I got out of the building, I saw the undersized moss-colored bus in the parking lot starting to drive off.

As I looked at the rear window, I saw someone's hand reach out through the slightly opened curtains. The small hand banged against the glass. I could also see a person's face in the back seat; it was a young boy whose eyes were swollen from being punched.

The moment the boy saw me, his eyes flew open. It was the oldest kid whose dream was to join the Mafia one day. Noticing my gaze, he hurriedly pulled the curtains wide-open. Behind him were the other kids—he'd opened the curtains to show them to me.

The next moment, a Mimic soldier on the bus grabbed him by the shoulder and viciously threw him backward. The curtains were then yanked shut, and the boy disappeared behind them.

I desperately sprinted after the bus so hard that my knees were almost hitting my chin. The driver apparently noticed and sped up. I rushed out toward the street, placed a hand on the guardrail, then leaped over it to run parallel with the bus. The vehicle gradually drove faster. I reflexively reached under my coat, but I'd left my guns behind that day. What kind of Mafia member leaves his guns behind?

The light at the intersection was about to turn red, but the bus

swerved left, barely even slowing down as the surrounding cars honked their horns. I watched where the bus was headed—there was a huge curve that went under the bridge and connected to the highway. I would have no chance of catching up with the bus if it made it that far. I had to end this before then. I dashed up the nearby staircase to the pedestrian overpass in three jumps, then sprinted to the middle before leaping to the nearby traffic overpass.

The overpass was protected with wire netting, which I grabbed onto with one hand to catch myself from falling. Then I climbed up the netting and stood on top of the overpass. Next, I rushed down the concrete until I approached an area that intersected with the road below. At that very moment, the bus began to pass below my feet.

I waited until the time was just right to jump. My coat billowed with air and rustled in the wind. I landed on the roof of a red minivan that was driving in front of the bus, throwing out my hand and one knee to blunt the fall. I heard someone inside the minivan scream.

When I turned around, I saw the bus and a Mimic soldier in gray behind the wheel. He fastened his gaze on me with bloodshot eyes. There were at least two enemies on that bus. They were military, and almost certainly armed. I, on the other hand, had no backup or weapon to defend myself with. But I would be able to handle things as long as I got just one look at the enemy. The bus itself sped up, closing in on the minivan. It looked as if the bus driver wanted to hit me along with the car. In this kind of situation, I'd normally want to cower and run the other way—that is, if I hadn't seen the kid's swollen face moments prior.

After a brief yet silent apology, I violently kicked the minivan's side-view mirror with my heel. The metal snapped as the mirror lazily fell, only to dangle by the vehicle's side. Right as I reached out and tore it off, the bus rammed the red minivan. I desperately latched on as the car drastically swerved to the side, and then I threw the side-view mirror in my hand directly at the Mimic soldier driving the bus. The oversize red-painted mirror shattered the front window and smashed straight into the driver's face before he could draw his gun. Immediately, he slammed on the brakes as he began to lose consciousness. Like an intoxicated rhinoceros, the bus swerved back and forth before eventually coming to a stop. Meanwhile, the minivan I was standing on also came to a halt as if it had drawn its last breath. I jumped off the roof.

When I faced the bus, I got a terrible feeling, as if someone had just put my heart in a vise. Alarm bells relentlessly pounded in my head. My vision flashed red and white. Before I'd even realized it, I was already sprinting.

—*"I will make you understand me."*

The driver was holding some kind of signal transmitter. I already knew what that meant. My body, however, hadn't caught up yet. A single moment that felt like an eternity passed by. The Mimic soldier pressed the switch on the transmitter.

And just like that, the bus instantly exploded.

My body was blasted back by a wall of air. I lost consciousness as I flew through the sky, but my back crashed into a nearby car, jolting me awake. I looked at the bus. Pillars of fire rose out of each window as it flew in the air almost as high as the eye could see. After briefly spinning through the air, it quickly fell onto the side of the road.

A moment went by before shards of glass rained from above. I tried to rush over. I tried to sprint to the bus even if it would only get me there a second faster. But in reality, all I did was fall face-first and writhe pathetically on the hard asphalt. The bus went up in flames. It lay on its side, bent in the middle. I tasted blood in the back of my throat. There was a deafening ringing in my ears, and I could barely hear a thing.

—*“Like, he treats us all like kids, but we’re all adults here, ya know?”*

My throat hurt. I couldn't breathe. I could hear someone's screams from afar. I realized—because my throat was in so much pain—that the one screaming was me.

“AHH!!”

× × ×

A small sightseeing ship floated in the Yokohama Bay. Gentle waves glittered in the rays of sun from a crystal-clear sky. The ship quietly drifted through the waters as it bathed in the reflected glare.

Only a few people were on board the vessel. In the center stood a young man with scholarly features and round glasses—Ango Sakaguchi, an agent with the Special Division for Unusual Powers. A man was sitting to his right.

“Ango, it's been a while. Thanks for inviting me. How have things been since returning to your real job?”

A man with slicked-back black hair and a white coat—the Port Mafia boss, Ougai Mori—spoke to Ango in a friendly manner.

“.....” Without saying a word, Ango simply lowered his gaze nervously.

“I would appreciate it if you didn't pick on my youngster here, Mafia leader.”

Sitting on Ango's other side was a tall, middle-aged man with white hair who towered over the rest of the people on the boat. He

was Chief Taneda, the commander in chief of the Home Affairs Ministry's Special Division for Unusual Powers.

Behind the Mafia boss and the Division chief respectively were men in black suits standing guard and the Special Forces in black. However, not a single soul was armed.

His expression strained with tension, Ango said, "Thank you for coming today. Once again, this is an unofficial meeting. All audio and visual recordings or physical intervention by anyone other than those present will be treated as acts of treachery, and the meeting will be immediately terminated."

Ango glanced at the bay as he spoke. Men from each organization secretly, or perhaps openly, waited on land off in the distance. In the unlikely case that one party decided to betray and kill the other during the meeting, the injured party's subordinates on the coast would immediately annihilate the enemy. This meeting was created on a state of delicate balance with each party holding a knife to the other's throat.

"My little Elise has been nagging me to buy her ice cream on the way home. Do you know of any good places, Chief Taneda?"

"Ha-ha-ha. Well, isn't that sweet." Chief Taneda laughed while cooling himself off with the fan in his hand. "Maybe I should pick something up for the bureaucrats waiting for my report back at the Home Affairs Ministry, too. They'd love to have your head, I'll tell ya."

Two Mafia subordinates waiting behind their boss started to shake with rage. However, the boss simply smirked with an air of indifference.

"Feigning concern for the higher-ups at the Home Affairs Ministry to boost your reputation? Government officials always seem to have something to worry about, don't they, Chief Taneda?"

"Oh, it's a trifling concern when compared with someone who has to hide in the sewers in fear of getting squashed by the government."

The two men spoke and looked as if they were playing shogi under the eaves of a house together. But the designated mediator, Ango, who was standing in the middle, couldn't stop himself from breaking into a cold sweat. If the two men before him seriously went at it, then Yokohama would become a city of corpses before three days had passed.

"Now, let's talk business," said Ango. Even the Division's elite needed to exercise utmost caution when interrupting these two. "Mr. Taneda of the Special Division for Unusual Powers has two requests for Mr. Ougai of the Port Mafia. First, you are to neither concern yourself with nor inflict harm on me, Ango. Next, you are to wipe out the European crime syndicate, Mimic, that illegally entered Japan. Do you accept?"

“I have no problems with the first condition. Personally, I’m actually extremely grateful to you, Ango. You’re talented, and you supported me a great deal with my work, regardless of the fact that it was part of your job as an undercover agent. Additionally, thanks to your mediation, I was able to have this meeting with the Special Division for Unusual Powers. I almost want to embrace you and send you a bouquet of flowers.”

“Then—”

“However, I cannot make a definite promise in regard to your second request. Mimic is a horrifying group, after all. We’re still under a lot of pressure thanks to them. If I could, I’d rather just run away crying. It’s that bad.”

Ougai looked at Taneda with an indiscernible smile. A piercing flash of light illuminated the depths of Taneda’s eyes. He closed them before giving Ango a signal with his gaze.

“Next, the Port Mafia requests that the Special Division for Unusual Powers—”

Chief Taneda let out a short, deep sigh. Then he pulled a black envelope out of his suit.



Meaningless images swirled in my head. I was standing in a white, barren hotel room. Next, I was standing in the planted forest in front of the art museum again. After that, I was on the restaurant’s second floor.

—*“Sakunosuke Oda, a peculiar mafioso who believes killing is never the answer.”*

I was in the waste-ridden back alley, then the quiet bar in the middle of the night; then I was riding the elevator at the Mafia headquarters. After that, I was sitting in the seat by the window at the café on a rainy day.

—*“Writing novels is writing people.”*

—*“You’re perfectly qualified.”*

I wondered if that man with the mustache was serious about what he said. Or was he just trying to make me feel better? Did I really deserve to write about people? Even if what he’d said had been true, it was all in the past. I no longer had that right.

At the site of the explosion, I somehow managed to stagger to my feet and check inside the bus. I shouldn’t have; it would’ve been easy to simply imagine what it was like inside. After that, I decided to leave the scene before it drew too much attention. I went over to the restaurant.

—*“They’re an army.”*

—“These men don’t know how to live outside of a battlefield. They’re known as *grau geists*—men with no master.”

The lights were out; it was quiet.

When I went inside, I found the owner, Pops, dead.

He was lying behind the counter on a pot and the shelf for cooking utensils. He’d been shot in the chest three times, and his eyes were still open. His hand was still gripping the curry ladle. He must’ve tried to grab on to whatever was nearby on the spur of the moment. I wondered how he’d planned on fighting against armed Mimic soldiers with only a ladle. Just what you would expect from the owner of a Mafia-affiliated restaurant.

Only when I gently closed Pops’s eyelids did he actually look dead. I could feel my soul being tightly *squeezed* out of my body. It was the sound the spirit makes when it is irreversibly disfigured.

A military knife was stuck in the counter, and underneath it was a map. After pulling out the knife, I looked at the map. It contained a drawing of some mountainous terrain not too far away. There was a red X on some old private property in the mountains with the words *Ghost Graveyard* scribbled next to it.

I was sure it was a message from Mimic—from Gide. I folded the map and tucked it away in my pocket. Then I headed up to the second floor and went into the hidden room that Pops had ready for me. An array of weapons for emergency use were stashed away in there.

I took off my clothes and put on a light bulletproof vest. Next, I slipped on a shirt, then slid my arms through the shoulder holster and buttoned it in the back.

I checked both pistols. Once I’d finished looking them over, I wiped off the dust from one gun, oiled it, and assembled everything. I made sure the sight wasn’t off. Then I took out the bullet and pulled the trigger, checking how it felt. After that, I loaded the magazine before inserting it back into the gun. I pulled the slide, sending the first bullet to the chamber. When that was done, I checked the other gun the same way before sticking them in the holsters on each side of my body.

Every precise movement I made was like a prayer. As I got myself ready, my mind separated from my body, and I wandered in my thoughts: who I used to be, what I’d sought, who I’d talked to, what I’d felt, how I’d wanted to live. All I knew in that moment was that everything I sought in the past was already gone—thrown away like a crumpled-up piece of paper.

I wrapped my wrists in bands packed with spare magazines. Then I slid my arms through the sleeves of the Kevlar-woven coat, into which I stuffed grenades and as many spare magazines as I could. I hesitated but decided to not bring any bandages or painkillers along. I

wouldn't need them.

Instead, I found a box of cigarettes from when I'd quit years ago. I headed to the adjacent room with the cigarettes and a match. It was the room the kids used to live in—the same place where we'd roughhoused together just a few days ago. It had hardly changed: the bed railing colored in with crayon, the filthy floor, the stained wallpaper. The only difference was the five shadows that should've been there, too.

"Good night, Kousuke," I said as I lit a cigarette. That was the name of the oldest boy. "Good night, Katsumi. Good night, Yuu. Good night, Shinji. Good night, Sakura."

I watched as a trail of pale smoke quietly rose from the tip.

"Sleep well. I'll avenge you."

Holding the cigarette between my fingers, I gazed into the smoke until the cigarette burned out and the smoke disappeared.

I began to walk.

"Odasaku!"

I was stopped by a familiar voice the moment I left the restaurant.

"Dazai? What's wrong?"

"Odasaku, I know what you're thinking, but don't. Doing that isn't going to—"

"Isn't going to bring the kids back?" I asked.

Lost for words, Dazai fell silent. Then he said, "Judging by the scale of past skirmishes, I have a good idea of how many Mimic soldiers are left. There's a little over twenty of them, and they're resting up for battle as we speak. They've most likely set up base in the western mountain district. I'm gonna go look into it, and—"

"I already know where they are. They left me an invitation."

I handed Dazai the map with the inscription *Ghost Graveyard* that I'd found earlier. He furrowed his brows when he looked at it.

"They're gathering their troops all in one spot. I'm not sure the Mafia can defeat them even if we mobilize all our men."

"That won't be necessary."

"Odasaku, listen. The boss had a secret meeting a few hours ago. He met with the Special Division for Unusual Powers, and Ango was the mediator. The meeting was so secret that I couldn't get any more information, but there's still something fishy going on with this Mimic stuff. I can feel it. So until we know what that is—"

"Something?" I looked at Dazai. "There isn't anything, Dazai. It's all over. Everything. Whatever else happens now is meaningless—just like what I'm about to do. Am I wrong?"

"Odasaku...," Dazai said softly. "Forgive me for the absurd wording, but—don't go. Find something to rely on. Expect good things

to happen from here on out. There's gotta be something... Hey, Odasaku, do you know why I joined the Mafia?"

I stared at him. We had known each other for a long time, but he'd never even attempted to talk about that.

"I joined the Mafia because of an expectation I had. I thought if I was close to death and violence—close to people giving in to their urges and desires, then I would be able to see the inner nature of humankind up close. I thought if I did that..." Dazai paused before continuing, "...I would be able to find something—a reason to live."

I looked at him; he looked back at me.

"I wanted to be a novelist," I said. "I thought I wouldn't deserve such a life if I killed someone during a mission. That's why I never killed anyone. But that's all in the past. There's only one thing I want now."

"Odasaku!"

I began to walk away. Dazai yelled out, but I didn't turn around.



Heading west, I started my journey.

Just like always, everyone walked in whatever direction they pleased. They all had somewhere to go, someone to meet, a home to return to. That was the world we lived in. That was the world I wanted to write about in my novel. That was the world the kids were supposed to belong to, where they'd each walk the streets however they pleased.

—*"They all found peace. Nobody can take that away from them."*

I recalled what Ango said that day long, long ago. Were the kids somewhere peaceful? Or had they become ghosts to wander the world of the living?

Just like Gide...and me.

As I was walking, I bumped into a small young man coming from the opposite direction.

"Whoa!"

Nothing happened to me, but the young man lost balance and fell on his rear. Everything he'd been carrying scattered across the ground.

"What d'you think you're doing?! Watch where you're going! With eyes that high up, you oughta be real good at that! Ugh... All the detective equipment the boss gave me..."

I helped the young man pick up his scattered belongings: recording paper, a pen, a camera, and a bag for storing forensic evidence. Maybe he was a forensic technician on a murder case.

"You a cop?" I asked for no particular reason.

"Me?" He squinted his already narrow eyes in utter disgust. "I'd

appreciate it if you didn't lump me in with a bunch of incompetents! You don't know who I am? Soon I'll be a household name throughout all of Japan, so don't you forget! I am the world's greatest detective, Ranpo Edo—"

"Sorry about that," I cut him off midsentence. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm in a hurry."

"Hey! You'd be a real fool to throw away your chance to talk to this amazing detective! In fact, you won't be able to resist once you see my skills in action! Allow me to show you so I can rid you of any doubts. Hmm, let's see... The reason you're in a hurry is..."

The cheerful, haughty young man cackled, then stared at me.

"You..."

His eyes suddenly narrowed, and the air around him instantly chilled. The depths of his almond eyes harbored an inhuman glow.

"You..." Unlike just a moment ago, the young man spoke in a whisper. "I'm telling you this for your own good. You must not go to your destination. Reconsider."

"Why?"

"Because if you go.....you're gonna die."

I lit another cigarette, then turned my back to him. Heading west, I marched on once more. As I walked away, I responded to the young man behind me:

"I know."



After heading down the forest road flourishing with oak trees, I saw a Western-style building. The first things that caught my eyes were the violet slate roof and the semicircle pediment with its religious motif. Basking in the evening sun, it idly stood out against the forest.

At the end of the narrow gravel path stood two Mimic soldiers with submachine guns. They must've been the guards.

"Can I ask you something?"

I casually struck up conversation as I strode toward them. The soldiers, taken by surprise, pointed their guns at me, but I'd already drawn my pistols from the holsters under my arms.

I fired two shots at once, one to the left and one to the right. The bullets buried themselves in their heads before shattering through the opposite side of their skulls. Their blood and brain matter splashed against the trees behind them, and they perished without really even knowing what happened. Their bodies hit the ground with a wet thud that echoed through the forest almost simultaneously. After putting away my pistols, I continued to walk without even looking at the bodies.

As I followed the pathway, I headed to the building's front door. I looked up at the attic space on the third floor near the rooftop on the other side of the lighting window. There was a sentry on watch holding a sniper rifle. Since I'd avoided his range of sight as I approached, he had no idea there was an intruder right below him.

I snapped my fingers to get his attention. When he followed the sound and noticed me, his eyes opened wide in astonishment. I put a bullet in his head before he could even get a hand on his rifle, and the sniper fell backward and crashed to the floor below with a bang. The soldiers inside had surely noticed that something was wrong now. I headed toward the porch, walking at my normal pace, then stopped to take out a cigarette and lit it. The murky smoke filled my lungs.

I stared at my hands—the hands that had just killed three people. They were my hands in every respect, no different from the hands that had avoided killing all those years. My fingers harbored no lust for blood. Neither did the trigger, nor the bullets. The urge to kill dwelled deep within the reaches of my mind.

Soon a ruckus began to break out inside the building—sounds of yelling, running, and magazines being loaded. I slid to the side of the French front door and leaned against the wall next to the stone pillar. With my back against the hard stone wall, I reached out to my side and knocked on the door. Immediately, there was a rumble as if the ground had cracked open, and countless bullets shattered the door, turning it into nothing more than sawdust in the wind.

I looked out of the corner of my eye with both pistols at the ready. Five seconds. Ten seconds. After twelve seconds went by and the soldiers tried to reload their guns, I pulled the pin out of a grenade and threw it into the building. As the explosion blew out the interior, I spit the cigarette out of my mouth. Then, holding out my two pistols, I rushed inside.

Bullets soared through the smoke. I pitched myself forward onto the floor, firing twice. The flash from the guns lit the room up in white. After rolling forward, I shifted to the side and leaped toward the corner of the room while firing two more shots. Bits of plaster, spurts of blood, and smoke were illuminated by the gunfire. As submachine gun bullets hit the ground below me, I ran alongside the wall knowing where they would land. Numerous empty shells hit the floor, playing the music of war. Before long, I pulled my guns together and fired twice at the enemies in the room's center. Then there was silence.

All the soldiers that were in my way when I broke in had been taken care of. I surveyed the room. The entrance hall to the Western-style building, having been blown apart by gunfire, was now an

atrium. The stained glass near the ceiling dimly tinted the dust and gunpowder smoke inside. Six Mimic soldiers lay dead underneath.

According to what Dazai had said, there were still quite a few enemies left. The bloodbath still had a ways to go.

I began to hear the footsteps of soldiers at the opposite end of the carpeted stairs. My skill allowed me to see only up to five seconds into the future; that wasn't enough time to figure out what kinds of traps and battle formations the enemy had set up ahead of me.

After reloading my guns, I slowly walked up the staircase. At the top was a long, narrow connecting corridor. If the enemy closed in from the other side, I could take cover while putting up a barrage. I saw soldiers at the end of the corridor, and they immediately drew their guns. I decided to charge the enemy instead.

I rushed down the corridor; it was so narrow that I had almost no space to dodge. There were four enemies charging at me while firing submachine guns, the most optimal weapon at this distance. I bent forward and sprinted toward the Mimic soldier in the very front, then fired my pistol. His forehead took the bullet, bending him backward. Next, I swiftly rushed into the pocket and used the soldier's corpse as a shield while firing two more shots. A bullet fatally pierced the second soldier's throat. His fingers spasmed, causing him to shoot a line of bullets into the ceiling.

I kicked the corpse's sternum, sending it flying into the soldier directly behind him. While the third soldier tried to push the body away, I slipped to his side and struck him in the chin with my palm, then put a bullet through the top of his skull. Crimson liquid splattered against the wall. While the last soldier fired a submachine gun, I jumped to the side and dodged. Then I kicked off the wall once more to evade the line of fire horizontally pursuing me. Just as my leap took me right above the enemy, I unloaded the rest of my clip. I landed at the end of the connecting corridor. Only a brief moment had passed since the first shot. After another second had gone by, I heard the soldier collapse to the ground in the background. I only used the sound to confirm his death before once again continuing on ahead.

At the end of the connecting corridor was a spacious lounge facing the courtyard. It had a large fireplace with medieval-style decor, a red velvet armchair, and a war flag encased in a golden picture frame.

This mansion used to be the residence of foreign aristocrats. When I researched the place beforehand, I learned that the owner of this vast estate returned to his homeland after his assets had been confiscated with the spread of the war. Ever since then, the mansion's ownership remained up in the air as it patiently waited for an occupant who was never to return.

I stopped. I knew there was a remote directional mine up ahead, and if I went any farther, I'd get caught in the blast. My only option was to shoot through the wall to destroy it. I aimed my gun. The moment I did so, I realized my failure—there was another directional mine right behind me as well. Whoever was watching this place from afar must've decided that they'd blow up the mine behind me the moment I noticed the one to my front.

My skill allowed me to see the future, but *when things happened because I'd changed my course of action, I only started seeing the future from the moment I made the change*. Therefore, if there was a trap that would be triggered one second after I aimed my gun at the mine ahead, then I would only be able to see that future one second before it was triggered. This was one of those cases.

I lunged forward, and immediately the high-performance explosive behind me detonated. Shrapnel and the expanding fireball tore through my coat. When the blast slammed me against the floor, I immediately covered my head and stayed low. In a flash, the directional mine ahead blasted down the door, and the impact battered my body. It was a surprise attack that used my skill against me, coupled with a pincer attack from directional mines on both sides. This enemy knew the ins and outs of my "precognition," both the capabilities and weaknesses alike.

I had a vision.

Soldiers came in droves, rappelling through the large windows lined up on my left side. However, I was still crawling on the ground, in no position to fight back.

I had only around four seconds before they'd arrive. It was sink or swim. I took my chances and fought to pick up my pistols. I felt a dull pain in my right side; one of the pellets from the explosion had buried itself in my flesh near my hip bone, which wasn't protected by my bulletproof vest. Blood stained my shirt. I saw ropes dangle from outside the window, followed by descending soldiers' shoes. I picked up my guns with a groan. Each window was smashed through as eight soldiers came swinging into the building.

There was no time to take cover. As the glass shattered in the air, I felt as if I could see the sparkle of each fragment. First, I shot one bullet out of each gun, piercing the first two soldiers in the throat and head, respectively. Thereupon, the other soldiers landed inside. My coat fluttered in the air as I flipped over and lowered my posture before shooting two more bullets, finishing off the two closest soldiers. The remaining enemies aimed their guns at me. The fragments of glass finally hit the ground, creating countless bouncing gems of light.

Then the gunfight commenced—a shoot-out close enough to hold a boxing match. Gunfire filled the room, and my surroundings flashed

bright white. Granular apostles of death soared through the sparkling world. I could see it. Leaning forward almost perpendicular to the ground, I avoided the close-range gunfire. Then I crossed my arms and fired two shots. I bent backward until my chest was facing the ceiling and shot two shots at the enemies on both sides. An impact to the chest sent me flying backward. A bullet hit my bulletproof vest, knocking the wind out of me as if I'd been hit with a cannonball.

My bullets missed one of the soldiers. I caught my fall by placing a hand on the glass-covered floor. Then I swiftly swept the enemy's legs as he tried to fire his submachine gun. Despite being midfall, the soldier reached out and grabbed my coat collar. He was planning on dragging me down to the ground with him.

This one moved nothing like the other soldiers. When I caught a glimpse of the badge on the lapel of his military fatigues, I realized he was most likely Mimic's deputy commander—Gide's right-hand man and chief of staff.

I tried to aim the pistol in my left hand at his throat, but he quickly knocked it away with the tip of his submachine gun. We tangled, then rolled on the ground. I threw my left palm at his chin in an attempt to give him a concussion, but he evaded, then immediately grabbed my sleeve and twisted it behind my back, apparently going for a joint lock. My shoulder made a dull sound. If he kept that up, I was sure my shoulder would be irreversibly damaged.

However, it's a bad idea to attempt close combat against someone with the ability to see the future. I'd wanted him to do this from the start. Grabbing my pistol with my free hand, I bent forward and unloaded the clip *into the floor*. The empty shells bounced off the ground with noises like small bells. The deputy commander's grip weakened, and he collapsed to the ground, a slug now buried in his throat. One of the bullets I'd just shot into the floor had ricocheted and pierced his neck. Gritting my teeth from the excruciating pain in my chest, I checked over my bulletproof vest. I'd been hit in the torso three times, each shot stopped by the Kevlar. After removing the vest, I tossed it to the ground. I'd most likely fractured a rib.

"Guh..."

I turned around to find the deputy commander still conscious, but the wound was fatal. It'd be about another ten minutes before he died.

"Want me to finish you off?" I asked while aiming my pistol at his head.

".....Yes...please....," he replied in a feeble voice. His throat must've been full of blood.

"Any last words?"

"Thank you...for fighting me..."

The deputy commander closed his eyes. The gunshot wound

must've hurt, and yet, he was faintly smiling.

"The commandant is up ahead... Please save him, too.....from this hell..."

I pulled the trigger. His skull burst, spewing blood and brain matter onto the floor. The deputy commander briefly twitched before going limp. I stood up and reloaded my guns. Then I began to walk.

"Yeah, I know."



Dazai strode confidently through the Mafia's high-rise headquarters downtown at a quick clip, his heels practically scraping off the carpet underfoot. He got on the glass-paneled elevator alone, pressed the button to the top floor, then closed his eyes. When the elevator reached his destination, he opened his eyes again. His gaze was focused on only one thing—the office at the very end of the hallway.

Dazai drew in his chin and began to walk. The large-built men in black suits guarding the door silently blocked Dazai's path. Both were carrying automatic rifles.

"Move," Dazai ordered without even looking at the men's faces. The colossal guards, twice Dazai's size, froze. Then they took a big step back, seemingly intimidated. Without even waiting for the guards to react, Dazai opened the door to the office and barged in as if he owned the place. He then walked over to the large desk in the middle of the room and stopped in front of it. Seated before the desk was the Port Mafia's boss, Ougai Mori.

"Well, well, Dazai. It's not often you come here yourself. Allow me to bring you some tea. I received some extremely expensive leaves from northern Europe. Pouring this tea on top of a steamed bun makes an exquisite—"

"Boss." Dazai cut him off. "You know why I'm here, don't you?"

Ougai didn't answer his question, though. He just grinned mildly while staring at Dazai. Only after a few moments went by did he reply.

"Of course, Dazai. It's urgent, yes?"

"It is."

"Very well. Whatever it is you wish to do, you have my approval." Ougai gave a confident smirk. "I trust whatever plan the genius Dazai has. You have always contributed greatly to my and the Port Mafia's endeavors. I expect you will do the same today as well."

Taken by surprise, Dazai fell silent. Even he felt as if he were walking on fine blades whenever he talked with Ougai. If he made just one little mistake, he could fall off the path. After pondering to himself for a moment, Dazai said, "I need permission to form a small

team of executive-level skill users to attack Mimic headquarters and rescue Odasaku.”

“Fantastic.” Ougai nodded. “At times, revealing your true intentions first can become the greatest tool of negotiation. Very well. You have my permission. However, I would like to know why.”

Dazai stared back at the boss without breaking eye contact for even a moment. Ougai’s narrowed eyes harbored a tinge of cleverness, as if they could see into his heart. It was the same kind of light that was once in Dazai’s eyes when he looked upon his enemies or allies.

“Odasaku is currently scouting the enemy headquarters alone,” Dazai said, keeping his emotions in check. “I sent an emergency response team of Mafia members to the area, but it isn’t nearly enough. At this rate, we are going to lose a valuable skill user.”

“But he’s our lowest-ranking member.” Ougai curiously tilted his head. “Of course, he’s a dear ally of ours, but is he worth sending executive-level men to the front line to save?”

“Yes,” Dazai confidently declared. “Of course he is.”

Ougai fell silent. He looked at Dazai, who looked straight back at him. It was an eloquent silence. The two men understood the other’s state of mind and how they would counter.

“...Dazai.” It was Ougai who put an end to the wordless debate. “Let me ask you this. I understand your plan, but in all likelihood, Oda *doesn’t want help*. What do you think about that?”

Dazai tried to answer, but he could not find the words to say. Ougai pulled an envelope out of the file cabinet on his office desk, then stared at it while he spoke. “Dazai, do you know what it means to be the boss? It means you are simultaneously at the top of the organization and still a slave to it as a whole. No matter what the cost, you have to get yourself dirty to keep the Port Mafia going. In order to deplete the enemy, maximize your allies’ worth, and keep the organization alive and thriving, you must also willingly perform any logically conceivable atrocity. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

He placed the envelope on the desk. It was large and made of high-quality black paper with small gold inlays in the corners. Whatever was inside appeared to be extremely thin. Dazai’s eyes were inadvertently locked on the envelope. Suddenly, he caught his breath.

“This envelope—”

Something began to thrash and flicker in the back of Dazai’s mind. It gradually turned into physical shaking, causing his head to go numb.

“I see.” Dazai managed to squeeze out just those two words, his face deathly pale. “So that’s what this is.”

Then he turned on his heel and put his back to Ougai.

“If you’ll excuse me.”

“Where are you going?” Ougai asked.

“To Odasaku.”

Without turning back, Dazai walked all the way to the door to the hallway. But as he reached for the decorated handle, he heard several noises coming from behind—something that sounded like metal parts locking together. Dazai’s hand suddenly froze. Then, realizing his failure, he closed his eyes. With a soft sigh, he turned around to find four armed Mafia grunts who had noiselessly appeared from the adjoining room. They aimed their guns at Dazai, but he wasn’t surprised. He simply surveyed the room before fixing his gaze on Ougai, who hadn’t budged from his spot mere moments ago. He was still smiling at Dazai.



Just past the door ahead of the battlefield was a vast, high-ceilinged ballroom capable of fitting a hundred couples performing baroque dance. A decayed chandelier hung askew from the three-story-high ceiling. Both sides of the ballroom were dressed in crimson curtains with gold embroideries, which were ripped and coming undone at the seams, creating a gloomy atmosphere that seemed to resent the prosperity of times past. At the front and end of the hall stood two oak doors each. When I walked to the center of the room, I heard a voice coming from behind.

“Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed...”

I immediately drew my pistols and turned around while pointing them in the direction of the voice. He stood before me—the handsome ghost with silver hair and clothes. Pointing my guns at him, I finished his sentence.

“...But if it dies, it produces many seeds.”

The ghost squinted, then smiled.

“John 12:24. You’re surprisingly well-read, Sakunosuke.”

Gide stood alone before the oak doors. There were no traps. His men were gone. He didn’t even draw his gun.

The sight of my pistol was aimed directly between his eyes. If I even squeezed the trigger a little, the bullet would shoot right at my target—right in the forehead of that faintly smiling man.

“Thank you for your hard work,” he said.

I pulled the trigger, but Gide moved his head to the side, avoiding the bullet.

“I am sorry for what I did to the children.” His expression didn’t change as he began to approach me. “However, it appears it was worth it.”

The muzzle of my gun followed Gide's every step as he walked alongside the wall. I shot once more at his head. My skill told me he was going to swerve right, so I purposely fired slightly farther to that side. However, Gide swerved to the left instead.

"Your eyes are the same as mine." He continued to walk noiselessly, a slight grin spreading across his face. "Those are the eyes of a man who has strayed from the path of life just like my men and I."

Gide still didn't reach for his gun. He didn't even seem worried that I was shooting at him. A chill ran down my spine.

"Welcome to our world, Sakunosuke."

Then, with no warning at all, he drew his guns and aimed them at me. I couldn't react to the sudden movement, but not because I was surprised. It was because I felt as though he wouldn't hit me even if he shot. With our guns pointing at each other, we stood in silence. The muzzles of our guns stared the other down.

"You sure talk a lot."

"Then the talking shall end here."

I had a vision.

Five seconds from then, Gide shot one bullet at my forehead and one at my heart. Which way should I swerve?

To the side? ...No, if I did that, then he would adjust his aim to the side.

Down? ...No, the outcome still wouldn't change.

I had three seconds left.

That was when I noticed something.

—*Oh. Now it makes sense.*

One more second.

Rapidly firing both pistols, I charged forward at my opponent.

And just like that, all hell broke loose.

Gunfire illuminated the area between us. As we rushed toward each other, we continued to fire. A few bullets grazed my earlobe and shredded the hem of my coat. Using the back of my hands, I pushed his guns to the side. Gide then brought his arms back to the middle as if he were forming a circle. The *grau geist* spit fire toward my chest. We were so close that I could grab his nose. When he shot his guns from each side of my face in a parallel fashion, there was no way for me to dodge both bullets at once.

I made a split-second decision to turn my face to the left, avoiding the bullet on the right while using my pistol grip to block the other. A bolt of lightning shot down my arm through my palm, knocking the gun in my left hand away. On the other side of the gun, I saw Gide's lips tightly curl upward. He had two guns while I now had only one. I

was clearly at a disadvantage.

—*Depending on where my remaining gun's aiming, that is.*

The gun in my right hand—the pistol I was still holding—was already pointed right at him. I pulled the trigger. Gide desperately tried to move out of the way, but we were too close. The bullet hit his left arm, spewing fresh blood behind him.

“Gah...!”

The gunshot caused him to slowly drop the pistol in that hand. Kicking off the ground, he leaped backward.

“How does it feel being unable to predict the future?” I asked while aiming the gun in my right hand.

“It is hard to believe that something so pleasant exists in this world,” Gide responded.

Regardless of the future seen and the action taken based on said future, the opponent would *overwrite* it and adjust their reaction. There was only one simple, yet extreme way to solve this problem—just don't rely on your skill.

With only one pistol each, Gide and I faced off. Showing his teeth in a wide half-moon smile, he laughed. The expression on my face was probably no different.



Dazai calmly stared at the guns pointed in his direction.

“You still haven't had any tea, Dazai,” Ougai said. “Come—have a seat.”

Dazai didn't even budge. A guard in a black suit slipped to his side, then pointed the automatic rifle's muzzle right at his head.

“Odasaku's waiting for me.”

“Sit.”

Dazai glanced at the muzzle and returned to the middle of the room. Then he stood before Ougai and quietly stated, “I couldn't stop thinking about it. I wondered who was orchestrating the conflict between the Mafia, Mimic, and the Special Forces. But I arrived at a conclusion the moment I realized Ango was from the Special Division for Unusual Powers: They're the ones behind this. In the government's eyes, the Mafia and Mimic are just two bothersome crime syndicates. Having these two groups take each other out would be the perfect scenario for the Division, which is why they orchestrated it all. But *I was wrong.*”

Dazai briefly paused, then looked at Ougai.

“The one who painted this picture was you. You wanted to use the threat that the Mimic posed to help during your negotiations with the Division. Then you used Ango as a pawn for that scheme.” Dazai

halfway closed his eyes. “Boss, the reason you sent Ango to infiltrate Mimic wasn’t to get information on Mimic. You knew *Ango was from the Division from the very beginning*. Am I right?”

Ougai neither confirmed nor denied the statement. “Oh?” he simply said in admiration.

“Various nuances of the truth change when you think about it that way. Ango would give inside information on Mimic to the Mafia while also conveying information to the Special Division for Unusual Powers. Mimic is a group of ghosts in search of a battlefield. There is no way to negotiate or compromise with them. They pose far more danger than the Mafia, and if something isn’t done, then they’ll clash with government agencies before long. That’s what the Division thought, at least. So they came up with a plan to get Mimic to attack the Port Mafia. Ango was used to leak intel to Mimic and manipulate the situation. If Mimic took the bait, then the Mafia would have no choice but to fight back. The Division believed that and gave Ango the mission...just like you wanted.”

“You give me far too much credit.” Ougai smirked. “The government agencies are like wolves before sheep compared with the Mafia. They cannot be manipulated that easily.”

“That’s why you went through the trouble of creating such an elaborate scheme. That’s how much value that envelope has.” Dazai pointed at the high-end black envelope in Ougai’s hand. “You’re right. The Division is like a wolf before sheep. No matter how much power the Port Mafia has, it lives in fear of angering the Division and getting snuffed out. That’s why you offered to destroy Mimic in return for that document.”

Ougai’s smile deepened. Dazai approached him, then pulled a certificate out of the black envelope. It was elegantly written with the government’s seal stamped on it.

“This certification permits activities as a skill-user organization—a *Skilled Business Permit*.”



Gunpowder exploded and shells flew to the ground as the deafening roars of artillery fire filled the expansive hall. Gide’s gun was pointed right at me, so I knocked it away with my elbow. A bullet soared right by my face, brushing against my ear. I swung my arm in the air and aimed my pistol at Gide’s forehead. He swung his arm up from below, grabbing my elbow. Then he jerked my arm to the side, causing me to shoot and shatter the chandelier. Elbow and wrist against wrist and muzzle—we knocked the other’s gun slightly out of line, making each other barely miss with our shots. Bullets flew past our ears and chins.

Countless gunfire created a wall of light between us as we stood close enough for hand-to-hand combat.

We pulled the triggers on our guns simultaneously only to find nothing was firing. Both of us were out of ammo. With our right arms still locked in place, we began reloading our guns. An empty magazine hit the floor. While Gide grabbed another magazine at his waist, I slid one of mine out from my wristband. He began to slide his backup magazine into the gun, but I knocked his right arm to stop him. Then I threw a left hook with a magazine still in my hand. The metal tore his skin, creating a red line across his cheek. Despite being knocked off-balance, Gide finished reloading his gun. I slid behind with my back pressed up against him, then threw an elbow while preventing him from firing. He dropped to his knees to evade. By the time I completed the elbow strike, I had already reloaded my gun. We aimed our weapons at each other at the same time, grabbing the other's right wrist with our left hands. The two of us froze in this strange position. My muzzle was before his eyes and his before mine. I was holding his gun with my left hand, but Gide was holding mine with his left hand as well: a muzzle in my left eye and a tenacious gray gaze in my right.

"Sakunosuke... You are incredible. Why did it take you so long to appear before me?"

"Sorry about that. I'll make sure to give you all the time you need today."

If I tried to break my wrist free from his grip, he would use that opening to shoot. But the same went for him. An odd balance of power kept us calm, allowing us to converse.



“Why did you stop killing, Sakunosuke?”

“Why do you search for a battlefield, Gide?”

I suddenly heard footsteps. It was the sound of many people running our way.

“Your men?”

“Your colleagues?”

The footsteps were coming from both sides of the ballroom. It sounded to be around ten people. If those were Mimic soldiers, I wasn't gonna be able to take Gide and them on at the same time. I'd have to end Gide the moment they came bursting in, then dispose of them. The footsteps gradually got closer until the oak doors were kicked wide-open. That moment, I broke free from Gide's grip. A gunshot echoed by my ears as gunpowder burned hair on my cheek. However, the bullet didn't hit me. Gide evaded my bullet with the same movement.

Our arms locked like hooks. Thanks to my skill, I already knew who was coming. At the door ahead were armed Mafia members, while Mimic soldiers were at the back door. They stormed into the room at almost the same time. As Gide and I bent at the elbows while locking arms, *I shot the Mimic soldiers behind him*. Pelted with bullets, they flew back. I was sure the Mafia men behind me were being shot in the same manner. I knew what Gide was thinking. He wanted to take out the intruders before anything else, as did I. He grabbed my lapel and pulled me, but I returned the favor. While we used each other as a fulcrum, I faced my enemies once more. I shot. Another Mimic soldier was knocked backward.

This was a ballroom. We stood in the center while empty shells hit the ground like surrounding applause. Using each other as a point of support, we continued to shoot our enemies. Leaning against each other's backs, we shot them. Our clothes fluttered in the air as we spun, swapping positions. Using the other's shoulder to rest our weapons, we shot more of them. Fresh blood from the soldiers painted the walls. Our shoulders intersected as we spun, shooting each other's allies.

The flames from the gunpowder and empty shells glittered around us. Both Gide and I approached our limits as blood gushed from our gunshot wounds. My face turned pale and my vision blurry. Only my focus was sharp. We danced together around the edge of death—a place not of this world. My skill automatically showed me the future, carving Gide's next words into the back of my mind.

“What do you think, Sakunosuke?”

“About what?” I replied before he even asked.

But in reality, I didn't say a word because Gide heard my answer in a vision and replied before I could even get a word out.

"This is the world I searched for... I lived for this moment."

We didn't actually speak because our skills were predicting what the other would say, and we would think how we would reply. The moment we came up with an answer, the other would foresee it in a vision and then come up with his own reply.

"What are you after?"

"Why did you quit killing?"

It was a brief moment of eternity—a short passage of time that hardly existed. Our visions and reality meshed, creating a world that transcended our world, making it impossible to know how much was real and how much was our skill. It was a world only we could exist in. It was a world we could find only through killing each other.

"I wanted to be a novelist. Someone once told me I should."

"A novelist..." Gide smiled inside our still world. "I'm sure you could have done it."

"Yeah." Maybe there existed a world where that was possible. "This man I talked to gave me a novel. It was the last volume to a series I'd been looking everywhere for. Before I read it, he warned me that it was terrible."

"How was it?"

"It was..."



"Boss, you started putting this scheme into motion years ago to get that license," Dazai continued, standing in front of the boss's desk. "I'm guessing this plan first took shape two years back when Ango went to Europe for business. You did some searching and found that Mimic would be the most promising enemy for your plan, so you had Ango contact them. I was wondering how Mimic escaped Europe and sneaked into Japan so easily, but the answer was rather simple. The Port Mafia helped them illegally enter the country. To send the Special Division for Unusual Powers into a panic and make them get off their butts, you *purposely invited the enemy organization to Yokohama.*"

"Dazai." Ougai, who had been listening in silence, cut Dazai off for the first time. "What remarkable inference. There is nothing that needs correcting. I have just one thing I'd like to ask: *What's wrong with that?*"

"....."

"I told you—I am always thinking about the organization as a whole. Just like you see here, I received a Skilled Business Permit, so the government has more or less given us approval to conduct our

illegal activities. And right now, Sakunosuke Oda is risking his life to eliminate a troublesome, violent group. It's a win-win situation. So why are you so angry?"

Dazai didn't say a word. That was just about the first time he'd ever been unable to articulate his feelings.

"I..."

—"There is nothing worth pursuing at the cost of prolonging a life of suffering."

—"Awaken me from this oxidizing world of a dream."

"I just..." His voice came out strained. "I just don't get it. You were the one who tipped Mimic off about the orphans' safe house. No one else could've found out about the location I chose. You killed those kids to get Odasaku to fight Mimic's leader because he is the only one who can defeat him."

"My answer is the same, Dazai. I will do anything for the benefit of the organization. Besides, we are the Port Mafia. We have always brought darkness, violence, and cruelty to this city. Why is that a problem now?"

Dazai knew. He knew Ougai's calculations, his mentality, and the rationale behind the plan. That was just the kind of organization the Port Mafia was. Logically speaking, Ougai was right, and Dazai was wrong.

"But..."

He turned on his heel, then began walking toward the door. Immediately, Ougai's guards pointed their guns at him.

"You cannot go, Dazai," Ougai called out to stop him. "Stay. Or do you have a logical reason for going to him?"

"There are two things I want to say, Boss." Dazai turned around and glared at Ougai. "First—you're not going to shoot me, and you're not going to have your men shoot me, either."

"Why is that? Because you wish to be shot?"

"No. Because it wouldn't benefit you in any way."

Ougai grinned. "True. However, you wouldn't gain anything by disobeying me and going to him, either. Am I wrong?"

"That's the second thing I wanted to say, Boss. There's nothing in it for me. There's only one reason why I'm going. *Because he is my friend.* Now, if you'll excuse me."

The guards placed their fingers on the triggers. However, Dazai paid them no mind and simply strolled to the door as if he were going for a walk. The guards looked to Ougai as they waited for orders. Without saying a word, Ougai crossed his arms while he gazed at Dazai's back with a faint smile. Then Dazai opened the door and walked down the hall until he could be seen no more.

“The last volume was amazing,” I said.

I’d never read a book that drew me in so much. Every word touched my heart, and I saw myself in every character. The man who gave me that book said it was awful, but I felt the complete opposite. I read it in one sitting practically without eating anything all day. The moment I finished the book, I opened it up again to read once more.

It felt as if every cell in my brain was reborn after reading that book. Once I’d finished it, the world I’d known before completely changed. Before that, all I had was killing. I would kill people for the mission—rob them of their lives. That book opened my eyes like the sun at dawn. That last volume had only one flaw. There were a few pages near the end that were torn out, so I never knew how one of the key scenes unfolded. It was a scene where one of the characters, an assassin, explained why he gave up killing.

There wasn’t enough information on the following pages to guess why he did, and not knowing caused me so much anguish. Not only was that scene an important turning point in the story, but it was also crucial to understanding the assassin. The book was nowhere to be found new or used anymore, so I couldn’t confirm that missing part. That man with the mustache never showed up again, so I couldn’t ask him, either.

After worrying about it for so long, I came to one conclusion.

—“*Then you write what happens next.*”

I decided to write it myself. I would become a novelist and write a story about why the man stopped killing. But to become a novelist, I needed to sincerely know what it meant to live.

So I stopped killing. There was one line in that last volume right before where the pages had been torn out. It was something the protagonist said to the assassin.

“People live to save themselves. It’s something they realize right before they die.”

I continued to think about what that meant after I vowed never to kill again. There probably wasn’t any deep meaning to it. It was more than likely just a line to *connect* information with more information. But whenever I read that line, I thought back to the older man who had so mysteriously given me that book. Even now.

Did he know I worked as an assassin? Had he approached me to get me to stop? Was the reason he gave me the last volume, tore out those pages, and told me to write what happens next because he wanted to tell me to *save* myself? That was what I believed with almost no doubt in my mind.

He had told me his name the first time we met. I had forgotten it for so long, but it was only just recently that I remembered.

His name was Souseki Natsume.

The same name as the name of the author on the cover of that novel.

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“I was a hero,” Gide said.

Gide was in a war. He fought for his country and for justice. He fought for his friends who joined him by his side. During a past war that stretched the globe, he had made countless victories and saved countless allies.

Gide was a hero.

He was a soldier who protected his country, fought for its inhabitants, and believed that his destiny was to die for them. During a certain battle, Gide led a mere forty men into battle and conquered a stronghold of six hundred people. He defeated every single one of them and captured the stronghold.

However, that was a scheme thought up by his own allied base. When the country was already finishing up a peace treaty, Gide was used by military staff executive officers in an immoral ploy to crush one of the enemy’s key locations and rob them of their transport network.

Since peace had already been declared, Gide’s actions were deemed a war crime, and allied soldiers were sent to kill him for his betrayal. To ensure their survival, Gide and his forty men had no choice but to plunder the enemies’ equipment, become the enemy themselves, and break through his former allies’ siege.

Numerous soldiers came to kill the traitor. Gide and his men took the enemies’ pistols known as *grau geists*, donned the enemies’ military uniforms, and fought to the death against their fellow countrymen.

They mimicked the enemy soldiers and became the ghosts of the deceased. Gide and his men killed their pursuers to survive, but they didn’t have anywhere to live. They were criminals of war, dead men, a military with no master. From there, they wandered the lands. They took on dirty work as illegal mercenaries. These former heroes were no more. Their lives, which they were supposed to lay down to protect their country, were used for no one. They just dulled their senses, dirtied their hands, and lost their reputation. Several men in the group even killed themselves. Gide didn’t stop them; he lacked the words to do so.

But there were also those who didn't die. They were soldiers at heart, and they believed killing themselves would strip them of that right. They fought, suffered wounds, and lost their friends, but they still got back up. It was proof that they were once soldiers, that their blood still drove them to be such militants. They searched for a battlefield—a place to prove they were soldiers—a place that would help them remember who they were even if it meant dying. They became ghosts who wandered the battlefield. Their homeland and pride forever lost, they became spirits of the wasteland in search of an enemy.



Time was still extending endlessly. We continued to foresee and respond to what the other was going to say. Not even a second had gone by in the real world, where I'd just killed the Mimic soldiers while Gide killed the Mafia soldiers. In this world, I got ready to point my gun at Gide, who was surely going to do the same.

"The final moment is near," Gide said in that world of eternity.

"Tell me one thing, Gide," I said back. "Did you never want to go after something else? Couldn't you have changed how you lived your life somewhere down the line? Something different from searching for a battlefield or a place to die..."

"Change the way I live? There is no way I could have done that." Gide smiled. A glimmer of sorrow flickered within his eyes. "I promised my allies that I would die as a soldier. Nothing else was possible."

We pointed our guns at each other. However, in the world of eternity, we quietly faced each other and talked like friends. Gide looked at me. I could see the sincerity in his gaze.

"But...perhaps I could have changed my life at some point. Maybe if I had tried to change earlier in life, then perhaps I could have become something else...just like you stopped killing others. If I had the strength you had, then maybe one day I, too, could have..."

There were only two people in that massive hall still alive. Our muzzles each pointed at the other's heart. Gide wasn't wearing bulletproof clothing, and I'd taken mine off moments prior during battle. A shot to the chest would be fatal. The triggers had already been pulled. The bullets began to slide out of the barrels.

However, we just smiled, facing our partners as if we'd come to know everything about each other, like old friends after a long chat.

—*"They've observed that when multiple skills interact, on rare occasions they'll careen off into a completely unexpected direction."*

So this world was a *skill singularity*.

"I have one regret," I said. "I never got to say good-bye to my friend. He was always there for me as 'just a friend.' He was bored of this world and always waited for death to come for him."

"That man was in search of a place to die just like me?"

"No, not exactly," I answered. "I thought you were similar to Dazai at first, rushing into battle and wishing for death without even considering the value of your own life. But he's different. He's sharp-witted with a mind like a steel trap. And he's just a child—a sobbing child abandoned in the darkness of a world far emptier than the one we're seeing."

He was too smart for his own good. That was why he was always alone. The reason why Ango and I were able to be by his side was that we understood the solitude that surrounded him, and we never stepped inside it no matter how close we stood.

But in that moment, I kind of regretted not stepping in and invading that solitude.

The bullets left our guns' barrels and slid toward our chests.

"A magnificent shot until the very end." Gide smiled. "I'm going to go see my men. Say hello to the kids."

The bullets reached our chests.

The *singularity* vanished.

The bullets penetrated the skin, cut through our clothes, and exited out our backs. At the very same time, in the very same fashion, we both fell backward.

Just then, I heard footsteps.

"Odasaku!"

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Dazai rushed into the building and over to the ballroom, passing the myriad of corpses through the corridors along the way. When he burst through the oak doors, he saw his friend lying on the ground.

"Odasaku!"

"Dazai..."

Dazai rushed over to Odasaku, then checked his wounds. The bullet had pierced Odasaku's chest, and a vast pool of blood had collected on the floor. It was clear that the wound was fatal.

"You're such an idiot, Odasaku. The biggest idiot I know."

"Yeah."

"You didn't have to do this. You didn't have to die."

“I know.”

Odasaku smirked with that particular satisfaction of accomplishing something worth the cost.

“Dazai... There’s something I want to say.”

“Don’t. Stop. We might still be able to save you. No, we *will* save you. So don’t say such—”

“Listen.” Odasaku wrapped his blood-soaked hand around Dazai’s. “You told me if you put yourself in a world of violence and bloodshed, you might be able to find a reason to live...”

“Yeah, I said that. I did. But what difference does that—?”

“You won’t find it,” Odasaku said in almost a whisper. Dazai stared at him.

“You should know that. Whether you’re on the side that takes lives or the side that saves them, nothing beyond your own expectations will happen. Nothing in this world can fill the hole that is your loneliness. You will wander the darkness for eternity.”

—“*Awaken me from this oxidizing world of a dream.*”

That was when Dazai first realized: Sakunosuke Oda understood him much more than he’d ever imagined—right up to his very heart, almost to the center of his mind. Dazai didn’t realize until then that someone had known him so well.

For the first time in his life, Dazai wanted from the bottom of his heart to know something. He asked the man before him:

“Odasaku... What should I do?”

“*Be on the side that saves people,*” Odasaku replied. “If both sides are the same, then choose to become a good person. Save the weak, protect the orphaned. You might not see a great difference between right and wrong, but...saving others is something just a bit more wonderful.”

“How do you know?”

“I know. I know better than anyone else.”

Dazai gazed into Odasaku’s eyes and saw a glow of conviction.

It was clear that those words were supported by some sort of strong basis. Whether it was past experience or someone’s advice—Odasaku was trying to show Dazai the path he himself had once tried to walk. Dazai knew that.

That was why he could bring himself to believe it.

“...Okay. I will.”

“‘People live to save themselves. It’s something they realize right before they die,’ huh...? He was...right...” The color in Odasaku’s face gradually disappeared until he was almost completely pale. He smiled. “I could really go for some of that curry...”

With trembling fingers, Odasaku reached for the cigarettes in his pocket before sluggishly placing one in his mouth. By the time he

pulled out a match, his fingers were too weak to hold it anymore. Dazai took the match and lit the cigarette for him. Then Odasaku closed his eyes, smoking the cigarette as he smiled, filled to the brim with satisfaction.

The cigarette fell to the ground.

Dropping onto his knees by Odasaku's side, Dazai looked up to the ceiling and closed his eyes. His tightly shut lips faintly trembled. The smoke from the cigarette rose straight up to the top.

Nobody said a word.

EPILOGUE

The conflict came to an end, and the city returned to normal. On the surface, the city was no different from before. The economy was good, people woke up and went to sleep, and the bustling days and violent nights continued on. Society and its underbelly appeared unchanged.



A light propeller aircraft glided through the skies over the coastline. There were only a few people on board.

“We’ll be arriving at our destination for the next mission in about an hour,” a young man in a suit said from the passenger seat.

“All right.”

In the reclining chair by the window sat a man with round glasses. In his hands were a few pieces of paper that he was diligently staring at.

“...Agent Sakaguchi, is that a picture of the next target?” the young man in the suit asked.

Ango, the man with round glasses, stuffed the picture away in his jacket pocket in a fluster so that his colleague wouldn’t see.

“No, it’s nothing. Just a personal photo of mine.”

After putting the picture away, Ango turned his gaze to the world outside the window, wistfully looking down at the city below.



Several shadows sprinted through the Yokohama Settlement’s underground aqueduct. Three Mimic stragglers had escaped to the dark channels. They survived because they had not been on the front lines during the battle at the Western-style building.

A dark cloth stretched out like a blade from behind and sliced one of the soldiers in half. The other two turned around and unloaded their submachine guns. Gunfire lit up the aqueduct, cutting through the darkness.

“...That won’t work against me.”

A boy in an overcoat appeared behind them. His black coat

danced through the narrow passageway as if it were alive, tearing up the remaining soldiers one after another.

"I need to get stronger—I must reach greater heights! Until he recognizes me, I will lose to neither military soldiers, nor guns, nor even skill users! I will lose to no one! So take a good look! Behold!" Akutagawa shouted as he sped up the dance of death. His woeful screams were absorbed into the Yokohama night.



In the middle of a verdant mountain trail atop a hill overlooking Yokohama was a cemetery with a view of the ocean. There were many new graves lined up—among them a small white burial marker without a name.

Dazai stood before the burial marker, dressed in black mourning clothes and holding a bouquet of white flowers.

"....."

He squinted as the strong sea breeze suddenly gusted past. The white flowers fluttered in the wind.

"I'll leave this photo here."

He took out a picture and placed it before the burial marker. Frozen in time were the smiles of those three men.

"I really wish you could've tried that hard tofu I made..."

Dazai closed his eyes, then stood absolutely still, rooted to the spot.



The blue Mafia headquarters building towered over the center of Yokohama's most prime real estate. On the top floor of the building was an office. Ougai sat at his desk, resting his chin on his hand.

"*Nihil admirari*—help the man mentioned above without hesitation in the face of any and all trials'... Hmph."

Numerous documents were scattered over his desk—loss reports of Mafia-ruled territory. On top of the clutter was the Silver Oracle that Ougai had once written. It had been recovered from the Western-style building after the conflict had ceased.

He listlessly picked up the document and stared at it. The subordinate standing to his side spoke up.

"Boss, it has already been two weeks since our executive Dazai went missing. We should probably gather all the executives for a meeting to decide his successor..."

"Yes... I suppose so," Ougai replied indifferently while creasing

the document in his hands. "We won't have a meeting. I'm going to leave Dazai's spot open."

Ougai stared at the scattered reports on his desk. The organization had received an item of great value, something that more than made up for the total pecuniary damage and loss of talented subordinates. That included Dazai's disappearance as well. Logically speaking, the results couldn't have been better. Everything was going according to plan.

Ougai folded the document into a misshapen paper airplane. Then, with his chin still resting on his hand, he threw it. The deformed plane almost immediately crashed into the floor.

"Things sure are going to get boring around here..."



Colorful electric signs lighted the streets of Yokohama's entertainment district. The area was always bustling with people even through the dead of night.

Inside a certain pub that had an orange lantern hanging out front, there sat a large man with white hair, completely alone.

It was a popular pub for cheap drinks. The man drank out of a sake cup with a sour expression.

"I can't believe the top dog from the Home Affairs Ministry is drinking alone at a cheap pub like this... Must be lonely, Chief Taneda."

Taneda looked up in surprise to find a young man sitting across from him.

"You're—"

"Allow me to pour you a drink."

The cheerful gentleman, Dazai, tilted the sake bottle and poured the chief some alcohol. After knocking it back in one gulp, Taneda shot Dazai a sharp glance.

"I've seen your face in our reports more times than I can count. You're a regular on the blacklist... So how'd you know I was here?"

"I can figure out most things if I look into them." Dazai beamed with a shrug.

"You're supposed to be missing... What brings you here?"

"I'm looking for a new job. Do you have any recommendations?"

Chief Taneda stared at Dazai in shock, but Dazai just innocently grinned.

"I find that hard to believe. There's a long list of things I'd like to ask you..." Taneda scratched his chin with a finger. "Are you interested in the Special Division for Unusual Powers? If that's the case—"

“You’d lose your job if I did that.” Dazai wryly smirked. “I don’t like places with lots of rules.”

“Then what kind of job are you looking for?”

“*One where I can help people,*” Dazai replied without a moment’s delay.

Chief Taneda crossed his arms and stared at Dazai in silence.

“Your record is too filthy. You’d need to lie low underground for a good two years to clean up. But, well...first, how about you answer a few questions? I’ve got an idea that could work.”

“I’m listening.”

“It’s an armed agency made up of skill users. It’s kind of a legal gray area, but they take on and solve troublesome tasks that the military and city police can’t. Their president is a sensible guy. It might be just what you’re looking for.”

Dazai nodded before closing his eyes as if he was contemplating something important. He opened his eyes again, full of determination, and asked:

“What’s the name of the organization?”

“Their name? The company’s name is...”

AFTERWORD

Good evening. Asagiri here.

I ordered the late Sakunosuke Oda's favorite Osaka-style curry online and tried it. It was extremely spicy, but good. But also extremely spicy. My hand was basically glued to my water glass. The moment I finished, I started planning when I would eat it next. It was that kind of curry. I apologize to anyone reading this in the middle of the night.

Anyway, this is the second *Bungo Stray Dogs* novel: *Osamu Dazai and the Dark Era*. While *Osamu Dazai's Entrance Exam* took place two years before the comics, this novel takes place four years earlier and is about Dazai's life as a Mafia executive. The title inspiration came from the artist Pablo Picasso's first works (as a young man) known as the Blue Period. The author Osamu Dazai was rather wild in his younger years, but the Dazai in *Bungo Stray Dogs* had his own dark days as a youth, too.

Now, if I may digress.

The substance of this novel came to life because of a certain photograph. Authors Osamu Dazai, Sakunosuke Oda, and Ango Sakaguchi were part of a school of writers known as the Buraiha, or libertines. They would gather at a bar in Ginza, drink, and talk about the literary world, novels, their family, and everything in between.

There's actually a photo of them talking and having a good time that you can find at the Kanagawa Museum of Modern Literature (taken by the photographer Tadahiko Hayashi). Osamu Dazai is trying to act all cool with his legs on the stool, Sakunosuke Oda is facing the camera and smiling, and Ango Sakaguchi has a hand on his glass while listening to Dazai's story. They're so relaxed that it's hard to believe they're in front of a camera (especially when you consider that cameras back then were huge and the flashbulbs had to be changed with every shot). You can really tell they got along. Not only are these three authors pillars of the literary world, but they seemed to be really close as well. I guess you could even call them "friends." Such wonderful, sympathetic relationships aren't easy to come by, and you can't simply take them back if you lose them. That's something even normal people like us can understand.

Then, only nine days after the picture was taken, Sakunosuke Oda

passed away from a lung hemorrhage due to tuberculosis.

Osamu Dazai wrote “Oda! You did well” in his eulogy for the funeral. Not too long after that, he and Ango Sakaguchi also departed from this world, and now all that’s left is this picture of them. The starting point of this story came from what will never again return, something forever sealed within a strip of film.

As you know, the characters in *Bungo Stray Dogs* don’t share everything in common with their real-life counterparts. There are a number of discrepancies in the series’s setting that contradict historical fact (for example, it was actually Osamu Dazai who looked up to Ryuunosuke Akutagawa). I have no qualms with readers treating these as entities independent from the actual history.

However, my belief is that the faint glimmers these individuals left behind for future generations (such as the lines written in their stories, or that *something* within the aforementioned photo) are the very nature of a great author. So to stretch the point a bit, I feel as though this series wouldn’t be able to live up to its name—*Bungo*—without these glimmers.

Enough serious talk. I just wanted to express my gratitude to everyone for their support and love for the series. Thanks to you all, we are planning on a third novel. I’m going to be extremely busy releasing four comics and three novels within a year, but I really hope you look forward to the continuation of the *Bungo Stray Dogs* universe.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my amazing partner Sango Harukawa for yet again drawing such beautiful illustrations and cool characters. I’d also like to thank the editors, advertisers, agencies, bookstores, and you, the reader! Thank you all so much.

Let us meet again in the next volume.

KAFKA ASAGIRI

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